Interview with Irvin D. Coker

United States Foreign Assistance Oral History Program Foreign Assistance Oral History Collection Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training

An interview with Irvin D. Coker

Interviewed by W. Haven North

Initial interview date: July 29, 1998

Q: Today is July 29, 1998. The interview is with Irvin D. Coker. How many years were you with AID [Agency for International Development], Irv?

COKER: It's difficult to say, altogether, but I started with AID in 1964. Some people don't know about that part of my history, but I started in the AID Controller's Office in 1964. I worked there until early 1968. Then I came back to AID in August, 1974, and worked there until September, 1988. So, basically, I spent about 19 # years with AID, altogether.

Early years and education

Q: Well, let's go back through an early period. Where were you born and where did you grow up? What about your education, and what made you decide to get into the international development business, rather than something else?

COKER: I was born in Petersburg, Virginia, which is about 121 miles south of Washington, DC, on January 26, 1935. I was raised in Petersburg, a small town with a population at the time of about 60,000 people. Foreign affairs were far from anything that we thought about at the time. We only thought about domestic programs, politics, farming, and schooling. However, my grandfather, who did not have a chance to complete public school, always drummed into my head, from the time I was in elementary school, that I had to go through

university and that I had to go to Howard University in Washington, DC. So he told me, early on in elementary school, that if anyone asked me, I should say, first of all, that if I was going to college, it would be at Howard University. He told me that Howard University is the premier black college in the United States.

Q: That's right.

COKER: So I ended up staying in Petersburg, Virginia, until February, 1952, when I finished high school. Then I went to Washington, DC, and enrolled at Howard University in September, 1952. My brother had preceded me here in Washington, DC, in 1950. He was to come to Washington and do his pre-medical school studies. I was to come and do pharmacist studies.

My father, who was a building contractor in Petersburg, Virginia, had somewhat autocratic ways. He told Calvin, my brother, that he would become a medical doctor. He told me that I would be a pharmacist and would come back to Petersburg, Virginia, after I completed my education. He said that he would have a medical offices building built for me, and Calvin would have the upstairs part of the building. He would send all of his patients down to me, and that's how the business would develop.

Q: He had it well thought out.

COKER: That was all thought out, as far as Dad was concerned. We weren't asked what we thought about this. We were just told, and that was the process.

In any case, by the time I came to Howard University in 1952, my brother Calvin, who was two years ahead of me, had already been “exposed” to a group of Certified Public Accountants [CPAs] at a seminar which they ran on the Howard University campus. This was also where he entered college. Since both of us worked with our father during the summers in his business, both of us were business inclined. So my brother heard what the

CPAs had to say. He decided to forget all about medical school and pre-medical school studies and enrolled in a business course of study.

I came to Howard University in 1952 and went through the same process. I went through Howard and obtained a degree in accounting, with a minor in economics.

Q: What did your father think about all of that?

COKER: Well, he got to the point where he had to accept it. He told us often that this was not what he had planned, but he had also learned by that time that we had made up our own minds. That even went back to our days in junior high school and when we were about to enter senior high school. When it came down to the leisure type activities that we wanted to pursue, my brother wanted to learn to play the trumpet. I wanted to play the piano. Our father, in his autocratic way, said: “No. You will each learn to play the violin.”

So he went out and purchased a violin for each of us. He hired an instructor and told the instructor: “I don't want them to be playing around on Friday evenings, so you must give them their classes on Friday evenings. When they come out of school, after they've had a couple of hours of 'break,' you can start the classes. We won't have to worry about them going anywhere on Fridays, except for their violin classes.”

Anyway, we broke out of that schedule, at the insistence of my brother. I followed him. We got away from violin classes. Our father learned, by that time, that dictating to us wasn't always going to work out. So we both ended up in accounting, with minors in economics.

I graduated from Howard University in 1957. In 1958, after six years of deferments from military service, during the Korean War, I was finally drafted into the service. However, prior to being drafted into the military service in 1958, I had been keeping up with the independence movement in Ghana, with President Kwame Nkrumah, and what they were doing.

Q: How did you become acquainted with that?

COKER: Well, it happened that, as I was at Howard University, there were a lot of discussions on campus with some of the African students on what was going on in Africa in general and Ghana in particular. There were quite a few Ghanaian students at Howard University, whom I had gotten to know. They talked about the independence movement in Ghana. I knew some Black Americans who were making plans to go to Ghana to assist Ghana to obtain its independence.

I developed a liking for what I heard about Ghana. I did not have an opportunity to work with Ghana and especially with Kwame Nkrumah in the independence movement. I had been keeping track of that movement. I then decided that, at the first opportunity I had, I would try to go to Ghana. I kept track of what was going on in Ghana, which became independent in March, 1957. I finished college in June, 1957. Then, in February, 1958, some 11 months after Ghana became independent, I went to the Ghanaian Embassy in Washington, DC, and talked to Ghanaian Ambassador Chapman about my wish to go to Ghana. He was the first Ghanaian Ambassador to the U.S. At that time, since I had a undergraduate degree, he encouraged me to go back to school and work on my post-graduate degree before actually going to Ghana. He said that the Ghanaian Government would be glad to have me go to Ghana, but I believe that he thought that American students going over to Ghana should have at least a graduate degree.

However, before I could get started on obtaining a graduate degree, I was drafted into the military in April, 1958. I had always assumed that someone was watching me when I visited the Ghanaian Embassy in Washington. In the process I think that “they” found that I had had all of these deferments and “they” thought that it was time for me to do my military service. Perhaps that's a little facetious, but I always said that there might have been such an association.

Military Service in South Korea - 1958

So I was drafted and went into the Army for basic training. When I started advanced training, my superiors in the Army decided that it would be a good thing for me to be an artillery control officer. However, I could not be an officer in the military because of my very poor eyesight in, at least, one eye. There is a provision which precludes individuals with a certain level of eyesight from becoming officers. However, you could be an enlisted man, if you had poor eyesight. So that's one reason why I would not make military service a career, because I couldn't be an officer.

In any case, I went to South Korea, supposedly in peacetime. While I was in South Korea, serving up near the Imjin River, I was in the [Musone] area. I was able to replace the traditional lieutenant who was the officer in charge of artillery fire control. In the process of doing that, since there was a combination of South Korean and American soldiers in our compound, I started a program with the South Korean and American soldiers, getting the Koreans interested in learning English and getting the American soldiers interested in learning Korean.

Then I moved from that to working with the South Korean people in the villages around our compound. I found that I was very much in love with what I was doing, organizing various programs. I thought I should look at the situation in the villages.

Q: What prompted you to do that?

COKER: When you are at a military base in South Korea and are going to be there for a minimum of 12 months, you already know the routine, and you look for something outside the “norm.” That is, something that's going to keep you interested during the time that you're there.

There were two or three villages around our base in South Korea. I persuaded some of the South Korean soldiers to take me out to the villages to take a look. I met a lot of South Korean children and a lot of the women. Other families were basically looking for things

to do. Then I started coming up with ideas of what we ought to be able to do, together. I found that this was the beginning of my deciding that I really enjoyed working with people. I did that kind of thing for an entire year, while I was in South Korea.

Q: What were you doing in the villages? What kind of programs did you have?

COKER: We worked with the villagers on deciding what kind of produce they could grow to sell to our compound which was agricultural or agri-business related. We talked about minor health resources which they had available; how they could develop better health facilities for the children. We talked about where the South Korean women were spending most of their time during the day. The situation in these villages was quite similar to what we found in Africa out in the rural areas. The men in the village talked about various things, such as politics, while the women all worked. So, even at that time, I was seized with the idea of trying to find some productive things for the women to do, while, at the same time, trying to encourage the men to be more involved in the life of the village. It was all quite interesting.

When I got ready to leave South Korea, the villagers praised what I had done. The South Korean soldiers said that they really hated to see me go. I even had set up some programs where we staged film showings of some of the movies that we had on the base. We would take these movies over to the villages with a generator and show those films.

Q: Did you speak Korean?

COKER: Very, very little. I did not learn the Korean language as well as we were able to persuade some of the South Korean soldiers to learn English. I think that this was typical, and not only of me. I found out that most of the American soldiers had very little interest in learning the Korean language. That was disappointing. I had no formal teaching. There wasn't much in the way of an “immersion” experience. It was a question of how much time during the day I could I get a Korean colleague, or counterpart to work with me while I was doing other work, so that I could get in some training in learning the Korean language. So

I learned the basic greetings and how to ask for a few things, but not enough to be able to carry on a true conversation.Joined the IRS and studied for an MBA - 1960

I left South Korea in 1959 and returned to Washington in preparation for my discharge from the military service. I was able to get an early discharge from the service in February, 1960, rather than having to wait until April, 1960, because I had an offer of a job from the U.S. Treasury Internal Revenue Service. So I was released from the Army early so that I could take the job as an Internal Revenue Service Agent. That was in February, 1960. That started my government career, which took advantage of the academic training that I had received. Those of us who had a background in accounting and auditing could qualify as Internal Revenue Service Agents. I worked as an Internal Revenue Service Agent for about four years.

Meanwhile, I still remembered the work that I had been exposed to in South Korea. I was also thinking about Ghana. During that time I also enrolled in graduate school at American University. I remembered what Ghanaian Ambassador Chapman had said about getting an advanced degree. So I enrolled at American University to get that degree. However, there was a tossup as to whether I would initially study law or whether I would work on getting an MBA [Master's degree in Business Administration]. I initially decided to study law. However, I discovered that it was too much to juggle a full-time job during the day with attending law school at night. This required studying at night. I had left school some time before. I found that I got out of class at about 10:00 PM and got home by about 11:00 PM. Then I would have to begin studying law. As I had very weak eyes, they failed on me. A doctor told me that I should consider that, if I were to try to stay in law school and complete my studies, I would probably wind up having to study Braille, by the time I finished, in order to use it. That was not encouraging.

So I gave up studying law and decided, instead, to go into the MBA program. However, before I could start the MBA program, I discovered that I had glaucoma. That was causing rapid deterioration in my eyes. The doctor prescribed eye drops to stabilize the glaucoma.

Then he authorized me to go back to class, but I could only take one course per semester. That required me to string out my academic training at American University. However, eventually, I finished the course work in 1970, when I received my MBA, with major emphasis on management and a minor in high finance. So that got my initial schooling out of the way.

While I was studying at American University, I left the Internal Revenue Service. I joined USAID for the first time in 1964. To do that, I had to leave the United States Internal Revenue Service, which I did in July, 1964. I took an interim position with the Department of the Navy's audit team, while AID was still considering my application for employment there. AID had made an offer.

Q: How did you get in touch with AID?

COKER: Since I had this interest in working with people overseas and in development, which came from my experience in South Korea, I felt that, having read something about it, AID might be the best way to get back to doing something that I had discovered that I had a penchant for. I went down to the AID office and started talking with them in 1963.

Since I had had courses and training in accounting and auditing, the first thing that AID did was to offer me a job as an auditor, working for a Mr. Acton, who was running the auditing facility, whose headquarters was in Athens, Greece. As I say, this was in December, 1963, when our daughter was born. However, I said to the AID office: “No, I can't take a wife and a new baby to Athens,” where we would have been posted and where I would have been required to travel 80% of the time. I said: “No, that's out of the question. I couldn't do it.” I said: “I'll have to beg off on that particular position. What about something else?”

So they turned around and offered me a job in the Controller's shop in Nepal. They sent me the post report. I read it and found it quite interesting. However, a few points in the post report were “devastating.” It said that tuberculosis affected about 95% of the population and that parasites and other filth were “excessive.” People were constantly getting sick.

Then the report said that if you had allergies, Nepal would not be the right place for you. I was born with allergies, as a child, and so was my wife. Our daughter, Shyrl, was born in 1963 as an “allergies child.” We heard all of that and decided that we couldn't go to Nepal. We told the AID people: “We still can't enter AID and go to a place like Nepal.” Then the AID people said: “OK, let us try working on something else, but let's not lose track of each other.”

Started with USAID's Controller's Office - 1964

This negotiating process continued into 1964. Meantime, as I mentioned, I had decided to leave the Internal Revenue Service and took a job in the Department of the Navy. I worked at the Department of the Navy for three months and then got a call from AID. They said: “We've got just the right thing for you now. Until you're really ready to go overseas, how about coming in and working in the Controller's Office in Washington, DC?” I accepted this offer and I was employed by AID in December, 1964, working in the Washington Accounting Branch of the Controller's Office. That was how I started working for AID, with the understanding that I would work in Washington for up to three years before actually going into an overseas position.

Q: Were you under the Foreign Service or Civil Service?

COKER: I came in under the Civil Service. I was initially required to work on “straightening out the mess” which, the General Accounting Office had said, should be cleared up in a few months. The first job that they gave me was to reconcile the “Accounts Receivable” and the “Accounts Payable” of the agency.

Q: Of the whole agency?

COKER: Of the whole agency. I think that I had developed an independent air while working for the Internal Revenue Service. In the Internal Revenue Service I would frequently find myself up against clients, most of them corporate clients who had their

CPAs [Certified Public Accountants] and lawyers. There I would be, the lone, Internal Revenue Service agent. I learned to work independently.So when AID gave me that first task, I knew that it was a test. I was able to pull together a reconciliation of their accounts receivable and accounts payable.

Q: It must have been a substantial figure that you were working with.

COKER: Well, I don't recall the amount now, but I was able to have a very serious, audit finding by the General Accounting Office removed, as a result of what I did. Then I was made the Deputy Branch Chief for the Washington Accounting Branch, working under one of my favorite people, Ken Day.

Then, in that particular Branch, I began working on what we could do about computerizing "Allotment Accounting."

Q: What was your impression of AID as an organization at that time?

COKER: At that time I was very impressed. It was my first exposure to it. I was working on the accounting side. It was quite different. It was my first opportunity to work with the government accounting system.

I had a group of people in the Washington Accounting Branch who were quite demoralized. They were low ranking people. They felt that AID had passed them by. They were putting in a lot of overtime work. They felt that they were not being paid much. What I discovered was that the people in that office were generating overtime work. They were using this money as extra funds on which to live a more luxurious life style than they could really afford. Much of what they were doing did not really require them to work overtime. Rather, it was the way that they handled their duties that generated the overtime. That means that they were getting back at the agency.

I analyzed the situation. After about six months I asked for permission to try to find ways of minimizing the amount of overtime that was being generated in the Branch. So I began to audit what the people were charged with doing. I would look at the amount of time that each person was spending each day on the work that they were assigned to do. I discovered that little time was being spent on this work during the day. However, when it came time to work “overtime,” everybody was volunteering to work overtime. Then there was a tremendous amount of work effort. I knew that we had to reverse that practice. There was no need to have the amount of overtime being generated, as it had been done over the previous, several years.

So I set out, every two weeks, to notify the people in the Branch that a day was going to come when we were going to reverse this dependence on overtime work. We were going to have more work done during the regular eight hours of the working day, for which they were being paid, and less work being done on overtime. After talking to the people over a period of six months, we set a deadline date for cutting back the overtime. We cut the overtime and we still got the work out. We did this without incurring overtime.

Q: What was the reaction of the staff?

COKER: They were upset with me. However, there was one other thing that I did simultaneously. In working with Personnel I asked them for a history of each of the employees I had in that Branch. I discovered that quite a few of them had academic degrees. Some of these degrees were in the fields of business education and business administration, but not in accounting. However, many of them had had courses in accounting. So I asked the Personnel Office if they would work with me and with the staff to get them to take additional courses in accounting so that they would be qualified as accounting technicians or accountants, as a way in which we could have the level of their jobs changed.

Much to my surprise, somebody in Personnel decided that this was worth trying. The people with the Civil Service Commission, which was the predecessor of the Office of Personnel Management [OPM], reviewed the case of each of these employees. They determined the number of additional courses to prepare them for another profession. We were able to get money allocated in the budget for these people to go to school. All of this was done after hours.

So, while we cut back on the overtime accrued, we also encouraged the people to take advantage of opportunities for other employment for which they could qualify. They took advantage of these opportunities. Several of these people were finally put in positions where they were reclassified as accountants. They went from the level of a GS-9 [civil service rating] up to GS-13. Others went from GS-5 [accounting clerk] to GS-9 [accounting technician]. So they eventually made up the difference in income resulting from cutting down on overtime payments. They had seen a certain amount of upward mobility, generated from within the agency. So that was important.

I stayed with AID for three years during my first tenure.

Q: What was the function of the Accounting Division? What were the dimensions of your responsibility in that Division?

COKER: The Accounting Division was considered to be the office that handled all of the accounting for all of AID-Washington. It also handled the accounting for some of the regional centers in Washington and Africa that had been established. You may recall that AID reached the point where it was required to go to a “40 Country Limitation.” You remember when that limitation was applied. Much of the accounting done was related to the central and sub-regional field offices which had been set up under this limitation. One of the central offices dealt with Niger, Senegal, and one or two other places. I especially remember offices in Africa. A lot of their accounting functions were handled by Washington. We also handled everything related to the Washington Accounting Branch.

Q: These concerned regional programs?

COKER: Accounting for regional programs and Washington was our main function.

Q: How did you find the overall, financial management system of the agency at that time?

COKER: At that time we were moving to computerizing our accounting records. We used the old IBM-1400 system. We were looking for ways in which we could put the accounting function into computers, minimizing the amount of manual work which we had been doing. I found that fascinating and a pioneering function. I was spending a lot of time working with the computer program people in designing a system under which we could take what we were doing in the accounting field and move some of that to the new, allotment accounting system. We were able to work with the computer people to devise what was considered to be the first computerized, allotment accounting system.

This also gave me an opportunity to do some TDY [Temporary Duty] trips to Africa, to Europe, and especially to the payment centers in Paris and London.

This TDY travel gave me my first exposure to traveling in Africa. I traveled with Stan Barinson. Stan was the person chosen to be responsible for the regional accounting function in Africa. Stan and I made what turned out to be my historic journey to Africa in October, 1967. We went to Senegal, Mali, Cote d'Ivoire [Ivory Coast], and Cameroon. This was my maiden trip to those four countries.

Q: What were your first impressions of Africa?

COKER: When I got to Senegal, I was impressed with the kinds of buildings I saw and the hotels. It certainly looked more modern and cosmopolitan than I had anticipated. I hadn't known what to expect. The kind of exposure that we had had previously about Africa was somewhat off center in terms of what Africa was really all about. So when I arrived in Senegal, I was very pleased with what I saw. Because of my investigative background in

auditing, when I went out to these places, I began to look at the situation on the ground. I got a direct impression of what the people were like. I have to admit that when I got to Dakar, Senegal, I found a situation where there were some people who literally were sleeping on the streets. That hurt. There were people begging for money to buy food. That also hurt. I was saying to myself: “Why is this?”I also set out to talk to some of the AID and Embassy people. I started looking into some of the projects which they had under way there. One of our responsibilities in traveling was to look at some of the projects that had been designed and implemented. I wanted to know how far they had gotten, how the accounting system was set up, and what information was being provided to the Regional Financial Assistance System in Paris and London. I began to unravel some things that were mind boggling, and one in particular.

A major celebration had taken place in Senegal. Ambassador Murcia Cook, in recognition of this particular event, had wanted to do something for Senegal. It had been arranged to bring over a boat as a present from the U.S. Government to the Government of Senegal on the occasion of this particular, major event. No one had paid much attention to the fact that, when you get a few feet off the coast of Senegal, you are in deep, ocean water. This was not a vessel which was geared to being in deep water. So the vessel was placed in a dry dock, and there it had sat for several months, if not years before I got there.

I was asked the question: “What is going to happen with this vessel?” In other words, what are you going to do with this boat? Is it going to be sent back to the U.S.? No one had any idea of what they were going to do with this boat.

I saw the taxpayers' money wasted on this ship. Then I started digging into some AID programs and discovered that AID had started a rice production project in Senegal in the Casamance area of southern Senegal, because they found that Senegal was too dependent on the import of rice. Consumption far exceeded production. Then, lo and behold, we had sent USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] personnel to Senegal. They had looked carefully at the country and then identified a place in the

Casamance area for this rice production project. They had done this without using Senegalese Government people in selecting the site for this project.

By the time I got there, we had about 16 people under PASA (Participating Agency Service Agreement) contracts [contracts for personal services] from the USDA, sitting around and waiting to do something. When I asked: “What are you waiting to do,” they said: “Well, we thought that we were going to be out at this site in Casamance, implementing a project where we could teach the Senegalese how to increase their rice production.” When the advance party from USDA arrived at the project site, they found that the area which we had selected was all under water. We had selected a site which is flooded out every year, when it rains. I asked: “Did you know this in advance?”The man I was talking to said: “No.” I said: “Well, why didn't you know it in advance?” He said: “Well, we didn't use any of the Senegalese experts for this project.” I found that was a waste of money.

I identified problem areas with some other projects. This didn't set too well with some of the AID people. So they asked me why I had come out to Senegal. I said: “Well, it was a combination of things. I was coming out to look at some of the programs and the accounting systems. At the same time this led me to look into some of the things that we were doing, some of which were mistakes. This was a serious problem. In any case, it was a very worthwhile experience being exposed to Senegal.

From Senegal we went to Cote d'Ivoire and had a chance to see what the French and the Ivorians had been doing. I had my first opportunity to stay in the Ivoire Hotel, which thoroughly impressed me. It was a big, modern hotel with an ice skating rink! I just couldn't believe that it was in Africa. I was thoroughly impressed with the plateau where the hotel was located. However, there wasn't much in the way of development programs going on. One thing that I did was to start inquiring about what programs we had tried to get started but which weren't moving as fast as we wanted them to progress.

One of them was a road building project. There I was again, off trying to find out what had happened to this road building project. I discovered that AID had taken a design that was developed for a road building project in Laos and transposed that exact design, including all commodities and equipment, to a road building project in Cote d'Ivoire. Well, the kinds of rocks and boulders encountered in Laos were not the kinds that we were encountering in Cote d'Ivoire. The topography was not the same in Cote d'Ivoire. So we had purchased a rock crusher, which cost approximately $380,000. That was one piece of equipment. The wheels for that rock crusher never arrived.

When I arrived in Cote d'Ivoire, a couple of years had gone by, but the rock crusher was still on blocks. I asked: “If you've discovered now that the rock crusher is not needed, and you don't have the wheels for it, what are you going to do with it? Are you going to leave the rock crusher here to rust, or are you going to try to find some other place where the rock crusher can be sent?” There was no answer to that.

Once again I was disappointed. I wondered what we were doing as an agency, when it came down to development assistance? This created a serious problem in my mind. Once again I'm going back to my audit days and I'm saying: “We're wasting money!” I was concerned about this.

From Cote d'Ivoire I went to Cameroon. This was my first visit there. I didn't encounter anything going wrong, of the magnitude that I had found in the other two countries. I had some very interesting conversations with AID people in Cameroon. They had some projects going on that we didn't seem to be having any problems with.

We left there and went to Bamako, Mali, arriving in November, 1967. Of course, you may recall that there was a war in 1967 between the Israelis and the Arabs. Egyptian workers had been sent down to Mali to build a large, 16 story building, right in the heart of Bamako, as you come across the Niger River. This project had basically been abandoned. The steel

and concrete structure was up, but the building had not been completed. The interior of the building and the facade that would normally have been put on it had not been completed.

I was amazed when I got to Mali. What I discovered were Malians operating the locomotives on the railroads. There were Malian pilots flying the Ilyushin-16 aircraft. Malians were operating various businesses which the French had formerly operated. I didn't find any Malians living on the streets, looking for shelter, or begging for food. I asked myself why Mali seemed so different from the other countries which I had visited. I called on our Ambassador, which was a part of the “exit interview.” He asked me what my impression of Mali was. One thing that I said was: “You know, Mr. Ambassador, I've been to Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire, and now I'm in Mali. In the first two countries I found the people far less involved with the economy than the Malians are. Why is that?” He said: “They have a different system here. They have a socialist system here.” I said: “Well, there's a socialist system also being followed in Senegal, but the people there certainly aren't so involved in operating the country, as they are in Mali.” I said that I was thoroughly impressed with what the Malians were doing.

I'm not saying that we had any heated exchanges, but at one point the Ambassador said that he thought that the Malian Government was not only socialist in outlook but it was a Marxist socialist government. I disagreed with that. I said: “It has never been declared a Marxist, socialist state. It has a socialist state. It has socialism. The UK [United Kingdom] has a socialist government. Therefore, I said that I couldn't see how he could compare the two. However, because of the very positive things that I was saying about Mali, the Ambassador invited me not to return there. He said that I was “soft on communism.” That's what it amounted to.

However, the socialist system in Mali at the time and communism are not the same. A country which is socialist in principle is not the same as a Marxist, socialist country.

So those were some of the experiences I had on my very first trip to Africa.

Q: Your trip must have made a very powerful impression on you.

COKER: Yes. It made a very powerful impression on me. I felt that I really liked AID. I liked the fact that we were going into these countries and trying to do things for the people. However, I felt that there had to be some adjustments in how we went about doing this. We had to have the people involved in what we were doing. That was in 1967.

I left Mali in December, 1967, impressed with what I had seen and feeling that I wanted to continue but on the Foreign Service aide of AID. Before I left Washington on this trip in October, 1967, the Controller of AID had requested the Executive Officer to process a promotion for me to the GS-13 level. The Executive Officer said that he would try to have the paperwork processed by the time I got back in December, 1967. When I returned to Washington on December 7, 1967, I learned that the paperwork had not been processed.

New job with private sector with the United Planning Organization - 1967

I wasn't promoted as quickly as I wanted. I thought that this expected promotion would be processed by the time I got back from the TDY trip in December, 1967. The Controller of AID, who was the boss, had said that this promotion should be processed immediately, but this was not done. So I decided to give notice of my leaving AID. I went out and began looking in private industry. In less than three weeks' time I had located a job as Controller for one of the not for profit organizations. The Board of Directors of the United Planning Organization had approved me to be their Controller. However, when they voted on it, they didn't call me to say that they had approved my appointment for that job. Instead, news of the appointment was placed in the “Business Section” of “The Washington Post,” which then carried an article that the United Planning Organization [UPO] had approved Irv Coker to be their first, black Controller.

Q: They put that in the paper?

COKER: Yes.

Q: That's interesting.

COKER: When I arrived in the AID office the next morning, I was stopped by several people, who had already seen the article about my appointment at the United Planning Organization in “The Washington Post.” They asked me if I had seen the “Post.” I said that I hadn't. They showed it to me, and there it was. So I immediately went to my office and typed out my resignation from AID. I was most surprised, to say the least.

After that I called the President of UPO and asked him if it was true that I had been appointed Controller of the organization. He said that it was true. I asked him why I wasn't called and informed. He gave me an explanation of some of the circumstances, but the story had gone to the press. So, since the story was true, I went ahead and submitted my resignation from AID. In my letter to AID I said that I was leaving AID to go to the private sector to diversify my experience and to acquire more so that I could offer to the U.S. Government on my return. I wrote that on my resignation form. I ended up giving AID 90 days' notice and I left the agency in March, 1968, joining UPO as Controller.

Q: What is UPO? What did they do?

COKER: UPO was the local, anti-poverty agency for the Washington Metropolitan Area. It was receiving its main funding from the OEO, the Office of Equal Opportunity, the Department of Labor, and HEW [Department of Health, Education, and Welfare], as well as the OEO were three of the federal agencies which provided money for the UPO for the Washington Metropolitan Area.

There were 23 subsidiary firms which worked under the auspices of the parent company, the UPO. So there I was, Controller for the UPO and 23 of its subsidiaries. That gave me a different dimension of experience.

Q: How big an operation was it?

COKER: We had contributions of approximately $75.0 million a year from the three federal departments. We also had private donations from philanthropic organizations such as the Ford Foundation, the Carnegie Endowment, and also from private industry. In this job my work experience combined fund accounting as well as commercial accounting. I had an Accounting Division, a Budget Division, and a Payroll Division, all under my supervision.
Q: Sounds like a big operation.

COKER: It was fairly big. I thoroughly enjoyed working there. However, when I came into UPO, I discovered that management had already thought about the fact that they needed to try to find a way of computerizing some its work. The first chore I was assigned was to find some way of getting some of our operations computerized, so that we would have a much more efficient way of determining where we stood.

One of the firms that I contacted was Booz-Allen and Hamilton. People from Booz-Allen came in and worked with us in establishing an integrated system dealing with personnel, budget, and accounting. They called it an “integrated financial management system.” In the process of working with the Booz-Allen people in 1968 to develop this kind of design and starting on its installation I discovered that Booz-Allen had a few consultants that they had sent over who were not familiar with fund accounting. They knew how to use commercial accounting, but not fund accounting practices. That's what you have in not for profit organizations and, much of it, in government. So I worked closely with them in trying to make sure that the fund accounting side was included in the design.

Q: What is the difference between fund accounting and commercial accounting? I'm not quite clear on this.

COKER: In the case of commercial accounting you basically sell something to generate cash income for services rendered. You are trying to end up making a profit. In the case

of fund accounting you get income for performing various services, but you have little concern about whether or not you're making a profit. What you want to present in the various statements on its operations is whether or not you are able to generate a surplus.

Q: Without going into great detail, what were some of the major tasks that the UPO was doing?

COKER: For example, we were conducting manpower training for people who were on the welfare rolls and who were unemployed. We identified people who had the potential for taking remedial education. Then we gave them training in various, vocational skills. We had job counselors who worked directly with these people and with organizations where they could go to work. So we were interested in getting people off welfare rolls and getting them into productive employment.

We did the same thing with child care. We taught parents, mothers and fathers, how to care for their children and how to take advantage of prenatal care services. There was a whole group of programs for getting the community actively involved in identifying what kinds of services a municipality might have available, how to acquire those services, how to work with the police in connection with the problem areas that they might have in their society, and how to become more active parents in PTAs [Parent Teacher Associations]. This involved taking communities, motivating them, and making them actively recognize certain things that they had not been doing in the past but should do. So there was a whole group of activities involving employment and health.

Q: Was this at the time of the “War on Poverty”?

COKER: Yes, it was at the time of the “War on Poverty” in the mid to late 1960s.

Q: Did you find that these programs were working?

COKER: Things were working. Once again, it refueled the feeling that I had that I got far greater enjoyment out of working with people than other things that I had done in my career. That tied in directly with what I felt about what I was doing in South Korea. All of a sudden, I was working with the “War on Poverty” people in the local anti-poverty programs, and I had the same feeling once again. I just felt that I was destined to be doing work of this nature.

Q: How many years did you do this?

COKER: I did this from March, 1968, until February, 1970. What got me out of this job was that I had had Booz-Allen people come to work with us in the United Planning Organization to put in an “integrated financial management system.” I had pinpointed the fact that there were some shortcomings in the Booz-Allen program and in its staff for handling clients using fund accounting. Since that was the market area where they were going to operate, they started working on me to leave UPO and join Booz-Allen. I got to know the Booz-Allen people quite well at the time, but I declined to take a job with them in the future. The more I refused the more they would send their officers around to talk with me about taking a job with them.

Finally, they said that the only way that they would leave me alone was if I would make a commitment to join them, or not to join them, in the future. I found out at that time that Booz-Allen was the largest management consulting firm in the world and was highly prestigious. So I made a commitment to join them. They undertook to give me what I thought would be an opportunity to acquire a background and allow me to accelerate my advancement. I said that I would join them in the future but that I would have to select the timing. I said that that would have to be tied to the time when I would have completed the process that I had under way in UPO. So I finished the project in UPO and I was able to join Booz-Allen in February, 1970.

Joined Booz-Allen as senior associate - 1970

I joined Booz-Allen in February, 1970 as a Senior Associate in charge of their not for profit clientele who had an interest in the installation and/or improvement of their computerized financial and administrative systems. There were two Senior Associates who worked nationwide in the U.S. on this program. We were successful in getting contracts with the Food and Nutrition Agency of the USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] and with USIA [United States Information Agency], which wanted to upgrade their financial system. We also bid successfully on upgrading the computerized system of the City of Jacksonville, Florida. We won the “model cities' contract” with HUD [Department of Housing and Urban Development] to do seven, computerized, information and evaluation systems for them in New Jersey. We did the same thing for HUD in upstate New York. We won the contract to revamp the public welfare system for the whole State of Massachusetts. We did the same thing for the city of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. We won the contract to upgrade the accounting system for the city of Elgin, IL. The last contract that we won before I left Booz-Allen was to upgrade the accounting system for the Los Angeles County School System in California.

Q: You must have had a fair sized staff to work with you on this.

COKER: We had a large and excellent staff, but the two Senior Associates stayed on the road a lot. As there were only two of us managing these contracts, and we had a staff working in each of those places, we basically traveled each week out of Washington, DC. We were lucky to be in Washington for a week at a time to see what our firm was doing in USDA and USIA. Most of the time the two of us were away from Washington. At the time my daughter was only three years old. If the weather made it possible, I would come home on a Friday night. If not, I would come home on Saturday. However, many times, after arriving at the Washington airport on Saturday, I couldn't even go straight home. I had to go to the office, which was located at 1025 Connecticut Ave., N. W., to check on the status of the work (reports) for one site or another. We had people back here in Washington, working on reports that were due, on an interim basis, for the various clients.

By the time I got home on these Saturdays, it would be like the end of a regular work day, say, on Saturday evening. Then I would have some time with the family, and my daughter would just say: “Hi” to me. I was gone the whole week, and my family didn't see much of me. I would get up on Sunday, the family and I would go to church, and then come home. Then I would immediately be packing. We would have an early dinner, and I would fly out again.

I enjoyed working for Booz-Allen. It was a highly prestigious company. It was a company which allowed you to do everything “first class.” First I was a Senior Associate, and then I was promoted to Vice President. That brought me even more amenities. However, at the same time I still had very little opportunity to be with my family. Family time was very precious to me. The company would have two, major meetings a year for the officers. At one meeting you could invite your wife to accompany you, and you would have some time together. The other meeting would be only for the officers.

This was a company which also afforded me a lot of advancement. As a Vice President, they guaranteed that you would be a millionaire in 20 years' time, because of the stock program they had established. The company fiscal year ended on September 30th. By October 31st, you received a check that amounted to 20 percent of your annual salary. You endorsed this check back to the company, for which you purchased shares. At the end of the second month of the fiscal year, which was on November 30th, you received a bonus, which was yours to spend as you wished. You also received a large, life insurance policy. Your family was designated as the beneficiary in this policy. You had six weeks of vacation time from the beginning of the calendar year, regardless of how long you had worked for the company. And you had unlimited sick leave. As I said, these arrangements were all first class.

However, there was little time to devote to your family. I have always been a family person. I found this situation very disturbing. So while I was with Booz-Allen and was on the road a lot, all of a sudden the UPO, [United Planning Organization], the organization that I

had come from when I joined Booz-Allen, was required by the federal government to go through a major restructuring. They considered that they didn't have the personnel to undertake this major restructuring. So the UPO Board approached Booz-Allen and said that, since Booz-Allen had done several jobs for the UPO and also claimed to be a community minded company, how about having one of the Booz-Allen officers assist UPO in the restructuring program required by the federal government. Booz-Allen agreed to do that. Then the UPO Board of Directors asked specifically for me to be the person to do the restructuring job at the UPO.

At the time I was in Boston, MA, overseeing one of the jobs we were doing there. I was told that Booz-Allen had received this request from the UPO, and the company had decided that I should handle this matter. Since I was the person asked for by the UPO, the Booz-Allen Board decided that they wanted to talk to me to see if I was willing to do it. However, I said that I would have to think about it.

So when I got back to Washington on Saturday of that week, we talked about this matter in the office. They said that if I took the job restructuring UPO, which would last up to a year, I would lose no benefits or incremental pay. I would be carried on the rolls as if I still worked for Booz-Allen and would be eligible for the various benefits that a Booz-Allen officer was entitled. Under those circumstances, since I had this offer in writing, I accepted it. So I returned to the UPO to work on this reorganization.

Q: And you were at home.

COKER: And I was at home. That was one of the best aspects of it. Toward the end of the year's time I spent restructuring UPO, I received a phone call from the office of Elliot Richardson, who was then the Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare [HEW]. I didn't know at the time how Richardson got my name, but he called me at Booz-Allen. They referred him to me at the UPO, where I was working. I was told that Secretary Richardson wanted to offer me a job as a Deputy Assistant Secretary of HEW

to work with him. I said that I already had a decent job. I was a Vice President with Booz-Allen and Hamilton, the most prestigious, management consulting company in the world. I would be going back to Booz-Allen after the current leave of absence I was on, and I therefore saw no need to talk to HEW about another job. Their comment was: “What would you lose by coming over to talk to the Secretary of HEW and other, senior officials of the Department? You might learn about something that you would like to do.”

I agreed that I wouldn't have anything to lose and I went over to talk to Secretary Richardson at HEW. In fact, I went through a series of interviews. After the first interviews I discovered that they had 79 candidates that they were talking to regarding this job. That immediately turned me off. I said: “Why did you bother to call me in?” I said: “I'm already committed to something else.” Anyway, they went through the 79 candidates they were considering for this job. After the first two or three screenings, they had narrowed the list down to 13, and I was still on the list of candidates for this job. I was very nonchalant about it, because I really didn't see myself going back into federal government service at the time. So I continued with the program of accepting invitations to interviews, each time they called. They finally narrowed the list down to two people, and I was still in the running.

When they next called me, I jokingly said that there weren't too many people left. The other person was from within HEW itself and was a known quantity. I said to the HEW people: “Look, this other person is a known quantity to you. I'm unknown to you. Why don't you just give this other person the job and leave me alone?” They said: “No, no, it's not going to be that easy.” After the next series of interviews, they called me up and said that I was the chosen candidate for the job.

Q: Were there any political conditions, in terms of political party affiliation, associated with choosing you?

COKER: At the time I had not been doing anything politically which could have been a reason for my choice. Not a thing. I was registered and voted, but I did not contribute anything to any of the parties. It just hadn't dawned on me how they had got my name.

Q: What administration was this under?

COKER: This was under the Nixon administration. It wasn't until they had narrowed the list down to the point where there were two candidates that I made the following discovery. I had gone to bat for one of the former, Senior Associates who had worked for me at Booz-Allen, to ensure that he would be promoted to Vice President of Booz-Allen. The Board at Booz-Allen had rejected my recommendation. I fought the Board over this promotion. They said that they didn't think that he was “Vice Presidential material” because he had not been able to keep his home life stable. He and his wife had separated. The separation was the result of the constant travel that he had done for Booz-Allen. I felt that our company was the cause of the separation.

Q: Sounds unfair.

COKER: Yes. I said that this rejection of his promotion was most unfair. Who had caused this? The company caused it and now it was going to use this as an excuse for not promoting a man who was being considered for promotion to Vice President. So this person left Booz-Allen. When he left, I never knew that he had joined the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare as an executive recruiter. He had put my name on the list at HEW. I did not know this at the time. In any case, they narrowed the list, and I was the chosen candidate.

Appointment as Deputy Assistant Secretary in HEW - 1972

Then I started getting calls as to when I could report for duty and what my grade would be in HEW. I was to be appointed as a GS-17 [”super grade” in the Civil Service]. However, they wanted me to accept an appointment as a “Schedule C” officer [that is, essentially as

a “Political Appointee” who would have to resign when the administration changed]. Since I had had 12 previous years of government service as a combination of military and civil service, I refused to accept a “Schedule C” appointment. I said: “If I'm going to come back into the government service, it has to be under a career appointment.” I said that I wouldn't accept anything else.

HEW got in touch with Bob Haldeman and John Ehrlichman [powerful Special Assistants to President Nixon]. They refused to accept my proposal. They said that if I was going to accept an appointment, it would have to be a “Schedule C” appointment. So I rejected this offer and said that I wouldn't go to work for HEW under these conditions.

Then Secretary Richardson himself went directly to President Nixon and met with him on the day before Nixon's historic trip to Communist China in 1972. On the next day I had a telephone call from Elliot Richardson's chief of staff to say that President Nixon had approved my coming on board at HEW under a career appointment. Under these conditions, I accepted the HEW offer. I called Booz-Allen and told them what I had done. They said: “Fine, that's great! We see that as a positive development for us. You'll be on the inside of the administration and you'll get to know people. We see this as a business opportunity. So we will still carry you on the Booz-Allen rolls under an extended leave of absence.”

So I went to work at HEW for Secretary Elliot Richardson. He was a wonderful, wonderful person to work for. I would say that, despite being a political appointee, he was probably one of the very few political appointees that most bureaucrats, including myself, held in high regard. They regarded working for him as a truly valuable experience of a kind which they had never had before. The man was extremely easy to work with. He would be doodling at the same time that he was listening to everything that you were saying and would then come back with very profound questions. You might have thought that he was not paying attention to you. He did pay attention.

He was a friend of the civil service and a friend of the bureaucracy. The unfortunate thing about him was that President Nixon had a landslide victory in the presidential elections of 1972. A decision was made to shift some of the members of the Cabinet. So Elliot Richardson was taken out of HEW. He was replaced at HEW by Cap Weinberger, who had been in charge at OMB [Office of Management and Budget]. Frank Carlucci had worked with Weinberger in OMB. Prior to that Carlucci was a State Department Foreign Service Officer who had gone to work at OEO [Office of Equal Employment Opportunity]. While Carlucci was with OEO, I was working for UPO. We knew of each other.

So I worked with Cap Weinberger and Frank Carlucci from February, 1973, until August, 1974, when I returned to AID.

Q: What were your responsibilities when you were Deputy Assistant Secretary in HEW? What area did you cover?

COKER: My job was that of Deputy Assistant Secretary for Finance for all of HEW, even though my office was in the Office of Secretary Richardson. There were seven agencies under HEW, and I had to develop an umbrella accounting system that would allow the accounting system for each of these agencies to feed into one system in HEW. This arrangement tied these agencies into a single system which provided a combination of financial and non-financial information. In this way the top management of HEW was able to determine what was taking place in each of the seven, subsidiary agencies, down to the lower levels of their divisions. These seven agencies included the Food and Drug Administration, the Social Security Administration, and the Office of Education. The seven agencies, including the office of the Secretary of HEW, made up the whole organization.

Q: That must have been a huge organization.

COKER: It was a huge organization. We had a budget of about $400 billion at the time. It was almost equal to the size of the Department of Defense budget. I had a staff of a little

over 300 persons. The Accounting Division of each of the areas subsidiary to HEW had an immediate boss. The immediate boss of those seven agencies reported directly to me.

Within HEW I worked in the Office of Secretary Richardson. I had supervisory authority over the Accounting, Procurement, Payroll, and Systems Divisions.

Q: For all of the agencies under HEW?

COKER: The Payroll Division covered the whole Department of HEW. The Accounting Division covered strictly the Office of the Secretary of HEW. Each individual agency had its own Accounting Division. The other two Divisions [Accounting and Systems Divisions] set policies for HEW as a whole. The Procurement Division handled Procurement exclusively for the Office of the Secretary.

Q: Briefly, what were the main issues that you were dealing with?

COKER: The Payroll Division was one of the things that Secretary Richardson had specifically charged me with improving, when I first came into HEW. Richardson said that the Payroll Division was one of the most notorious units in all of HEW. It was still sending payroll checks to employees who had died and had been terminated from the agency. Also, it was not paying employees who were still employed by the agency who worked in the different regions. Many of them had been reporting to their Congressmen about the problem that they were having in receiving their proper pay. Congress was coming down hard on HEW, including the Office of the Secretary. That was a problem for Secretary Richardson. He said to me: “You've got to get that albatross from around my neck.” That was an immediate problem I set out to resolve.

I identified a local firm that specialized in improving payroll and administrative systems in federal and non-federal agencies. The people in this firm worked very closely with me. We were able to resolve the payroll problem in the Office of the Secretary for all elements of HEW.

Q: That was a real accomplishment!

COKER: It certainly was. They gave me the Secretary of HEW's citation for having accomplished that.

On the accounting side we arranged to get the umbrella accounting system up and operational. So that was another, special assignment that received recognition. We revamped and computerized the Office of the Secretary of HEW and let that serve as a model for the other HEW agencies.

So, in a short time, we got quite a few things accomplished. When Cap Weinberger came in as Secretary of HEW, he had heard about our handling those things. One of the first things that he did as Secretary of HEW was to ask if I would be willing to accept the job of Deputy Assistant Secretary of HEW for Administration and Management, because there were a lot of problems on that side.

I was reluctant to take on this job, but I did so. I switched portfolios. I left the position of Deputy Assistant Secretary for Finance and went over to the job of Deputy Assistant Secretary for Administration and Management. I also handled Personnel, Administrative Systems, and a number of other matters.

While I was at HEW, I had the opportunity to attend the Federal Executive Institute, down in Charlottesville, Virginia. There I was exposed to some AID people that were also down there for training. While I was there, I heard that Congress had approved bringing the AID Foreign Service people under the Foreign Service Retirement System, in lieu of continuing under the old, Civil Service Retirement System.

What I always had in mind was that I would like to be in a position where I could retire early and go back to the private sector. I had heard of this change in the status of AID in

the Foreign Service Retirement System as soon as I came back to Washington. I started calling people over at AID in this connection.

I had a chance to talk to Irene De Mars, one of the Executive Recruiters in AID. I asked her about the change in the AID retirement system and whether it had entered into effect. She told me that it had. I told her of my interest, that I had previously worked for AID, why I had left, and what I was doing. I said that I was interested in getting back into AID. She asked me to send her a copy of my CV and said that she would see what she could do.

Irene De Mars worked very closely with me. She got the people in the Latin American Bureau of AID interested in me. I may not have the names of the Assistant Administrators right, but I think that one of them was called Herman Kleine, head of LAC Bureau. Sam Adams was the Assistant Administrator in the African Bureau. Bill Meineke was the Assistant Administrator for Services.

Among the geographic offices I believe that “Bernstein” or “Borensteen” was the Assistant Administrator for Latin America. He was one of the first to call me in for an interview. He tried to encourage me to come in immediately, to begin studying Spanish, and to take a job as Deputy Mission Director in Bolivia. My interest was to come back into AID but to come into the headquarters in Washington first and to get re-acclimated to the Washington end of AID. I held him at bay about taking the job as Deputy Mission Director in Bolivia.

Then I was interviewed on the Services side. Campbell was the Assistant Administrator for Services at that time. He had been nominated to go out as an Ambassador to somewhere in South America. They were looking at Meineke and Jim Williams, who had been Deputy Assistant Administrators under Campbell, as to which one would move up to replace Campbell. They decided to talk to me about coming in as a replacement for one of them.

However, I no longer had any interest in the Services area. What I had found was that, when resources were being cut, one of the first areas to be affected would be the Services

area. At the same time the top command of AID would expect to see the quality of the services continue.

Q: You're talking about administrative and financial services.

COKER: Exactly. So I told them that I really didn't have an interest in the Services area. I really wanted to get involved over on the program side of things.

So then I had an interview with Don Brown. He was the Deputy Assistant Administrator for Africa. Don and I had an excellent conversation. Don recommended to Sam Adams [Assistant Administrator of AID in the African Bureau] that he interview me. Sam said that he didn't have time, so I never did have an interview with Sam Adams. That sort of died out, and I couldn't break into that one.

However, Irene De Mars continued to work with me. She tried to find something for me. She proposed that I go back to the Latin American Bureau and a possible assignment to Bolivia as Deputy AID Director. I said “No.” I still didn't want that.

One day while I was at HEW I received a phone call from Johnny Murphy. Murphy and I had been in the Controller's shop at AID in the 1960's. Johnny had retired from AID and had joined Booz- Allen. I had also joined Booz-Allen. We had gotten reacquainted. Lo and behold, Murphy was rejoining AID. However, instead of rejoining AID in the Controller's shop, as you are aware, he came back as a Deputy Administrator of AID. We had stayed in touch, and he knew what I was doing over at HEW.

So one day he called me from Booz-Allen and said: “Irv, I'm going to go up for my hearings on my appointment as the Deputy Administrator of AID.” I told him what I had been doing after hearing that AID had been brought in under the Foreign Service Retirement System. He said that this was interesting and suggested that we stay in touch.

Murphy was confirmed by the Senate as Deputy Administrator of AID and entered on duty in that capacity. I was still working with Irene De Mars, trying to get back into AID. Next thing I knew, I got a phone call from Johnny Murphy. He asked me what kind of success I was having. I said: “Well, I have not been able to get into the program area, which is what I want.” So he said: “Why don't you send me an updated version of your resume, and I'll pass it around. At one of the AID Administrator's staff meetings, you know, the one they have on Wednesday mornings, Murphy passed my resume around. On that same day I got a call from Sam Adams, the Assistant Administrator of AID in the African Bureau. He asked me if I'd come over for an interview.

I went over to see him. This was the first opportunity I had had to meet Sam Adams.One of the first things that he did was to apologize for not having given me an appointment for an interview previously. Sam said: “Irv, it wasn't that I didn't want to meet you. However, what I was sick and tired of was that every time a black came in for an interview and they felt that someone should see him, they frequently sent them to the African Bureau.” Sam added: “I really think that we ought to diversify.” I said: “Sam, I couldn't agree with you more. Since I'm a black, and you're a black, what I wanted to do was at least to meet you for an interview, in case other people call you about me. Most of the time they will be calling you to ask you if you know Irv Coker.” I said that I wasn't even trying to get into the African Bureau, as such. I said that this was why I wanted to have an interview with him. I said that I had had a good conversation with Don Brown.In any case, after we got past that point, Sam Adams finally said: “We understand each other.” So that was fine with me. Several weeks passed, and then, all of a sudden, I got a call from Sam Adams, asking whether I could come over to have an interview with Dave Shear. Sam said: “Dave is in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, and I'm trying to encourage Dave to come back to Washington and develop a program for the Sahel area of the Sahara. Dave is going to need to have staff back here. I want to talk to Dave about talking to you. Would you come over?”

So I went over to see Sam. I met Dave Shear in Sam's office. So Dave and I talked about what his needs were, and I talked about mine. I told him that I had previously worked in AID on the financial side and of my desire to come back to AID. I really wanted to learn something about the program. I felt that that was the area which probably had the best group of people in it and the most interest in the Foreign Service. He agreed with me. So he said: “Grade-wise, you're higher than I am. You're a career GS-17. However, I have something that you want. Are you willing to come in and work with me as my deputy and go through a learning process.” I said: “I'm more than willing to do that. The grade doesn't matter to me. I want to work under somebody on these programs who can teach me something.” I continued: “From what Sam Adams tells me, you are among the best. If you're willing to help me, I'm willing to come in and work with you.”

That's how my friendship started with Dave Shear. Dave told Sam Adams that he would love to have me. So the process was put into motion. I left HEW in August, 1974, and went back to work for AID as Dave Shear's deputy.

Returned to USAID for work on the Sahel Development Program - 1974

Q: In the Civil Service?

COKER: In the Foreign Service. I was given the old Foreign Service rank of FSO-1 to come back to AID. That was the equivalent of a GS-17 in the Civil Service.

So I came back to AID as an FSO-1, having previously left AID as a GS-12, with the rank of GS-13 pending.

Q: This was quite a dramatic change in the scope and scale of your responsibilities.

COKER: Yes. At this point I was interested in growth. I felt that I was being held back in terms of the advancement possibilities that I had wanted in the 1960s. As I put it in my resume, I left AID to go to the private sector and diversify my experience. I went out to

the private sector and worked as Controller in a not-for-profit organization. I worked in a management consultant organization, the biggest in the world (Booz-Allen), where I was recognized and promoted to the rank of Vice President. I had a large measure of responsibility. I had gone into the Department of HEW as Deputy Assistant Secretary, at one time for Finance, and then for Management. So I felt that I had achieved what I wanted to achieve.

Q: That worked out well for you. You didn't get into the areas of finance and administration in AID. COKER: I didn't want it. I said that I wanted to come back to AID, but not in any of the service areas. I wanted to come into the program area when I returned to AID. That was the opportunity that I had.

Q: Well, how did you find the situation in the African Bureau, particularly related to the Sahel program, when you arrived back in AID? What did you understand to be the task and the situation?

COKER: When I arrived there, the Sahel program was on the drawing board. The Office of Sahelian Affairs had not yet been formed. We were given responsibility for coastal West Africa. Within the coastal West African countries we were charged with trying to map out how we were going to structure a Sahel program and carve it out of coastal West Africa.

When I returned to AID, there were 16 countries that made up coastal West Africa. Fermino Spencer was in charge of them, along with Owen Cylke. Dave Shear and I were then put in charge and were given responsibility, along with the rest of the agency, for developing the testimony to be presented on the Hill on why there should be a Sahel program and providing some concepts as to how it should be developed.

We had people like Roy Stacy; Maurice Williams, who was in Paris as chairman of the CAD; and we had Anne de Lattre, who had been seconded by the French and who also worked with us. So we had several people outside of and inside the organization who were willing to work with us and come up with this concept. We had Irv Rosenthal, who

had been working as an AID Deputy Mission Director in Abidjan. He was brought back to Washington. So basically we had Dave Shear, Irv Rosenthal, myself, and Roy Stacy within AID, and Maurice Williams and Brad Langmaid as two people from the Paris side. We had Anne de Lattre from the French side. Those people became the nucleus.

We started working on the concept of how to develop the Sahel program and how we would work it out. We had frequent meetings with Don Brown and Sam Adams on the concept we were developing. Then, occasionally, they would set up a meeting with Johnny Murphy to hear what we had to "sell." We would bring the African Bureau Office of Development Planning into this effort. Taking part were Bob Husseman, as well as Princeton Lyman, who was the DS [Design Service specialist] at the time. We would have these internal briefings on this matter. We regularly kept the Hill informed of what we were doing.

Q: What was your understanding of the concept that you were developing?

COKER: What I understood at the time was that, with the tremendous drought that had occurred in Western and Central Africa and in the specific countries that had been devastated by the drought, there ought to be some kind of program developed which would assist in protecting or guarding against devastating droughts of that nature in the future. We were looking for the kinds of substantive programs which could be started under projects previously approved. We were concerned with the development of the human resources of the Sahel, developing interest on the part of the recipient countries about what it was that we had in mind, developing an interest in the OECD [Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development] donor community which had an interest in this area, and developing an interest in the oil-rich countries, because they were prominent at that time with the "manna" of oil revenues that they were receiving at that time.

There had to be a program of intervention which would assist in finding ways of capturing and preserving water, so that drought would not be as devastating in the future. We

accepted that one could not control nature. However, one could take a look at various water resources to see whether or not there were ways by which one could tap them. If we were able to tap the water resources, then there were various kinds of programs that we could implement. Water is an essential resource that people would need. Thus, with the water, they could engage in agriculture and could feed themselves, among other things.

The result is that there would be a program which, as we devised it, would be massive. With the kinds of programs, or activities that would flow from them, we could begin to have some impact on minimizing the effects of future droughts. We talked about agriculture, health, education, studying weather patterns, talked about the inputs needed by the farmers, the weather forecasting that they would need, and the different ways of controlling water so that they could use it for agricultural purposes. There was a whole complex of issues that would need to be addressed. I saw all of these as coming together as a comprehensive approach to be able to minimize the future impact of droughts. We would need to encourage people to come up with a common theme about doing something in the Sahel area.

We liked to look in a crystal ball and come out with all kinds of ideas. We would seize upon them and try to develop them. We looked on them as a kind of skeleton on which we would try to put some meat. We just had a wonderful time coming up with ideas.

Q: Was there some sort of framework within which you were operating? COKER: I would say that we had a framework that basically gave us the task of coming up with some of the basic things that one would need to look at. Then we would try to develop some concept that could integrate these things. We would look at what the problems were and their causes and then look at what we could do to control the various aspects of those problems. Then we would consider how we could fund a program to deal with these problems. In other words, how could we get other kinds of resources on board. I think that we had basically identified which countries would be involved in this program. There was a

common thread among these countries. That is, they were the French speaking countries in the coastal sub-region of West Africa.

Q: What economic sectors were involved?

COKER: The sectors included water and agriculture, in particular. Within the agricultural sector, we felt that we should give the farmers as much advance information on the project as possible. Therefore, this involved study of meteorological conditions. In terms of water we considered what would be the potential sources that we could rely on. That led us into the question of dams. Some of the reservoirs involved would consist of salt water, and some had the potential of holding fresh water. We considered the matter of trees, because of the tendency toward desertification in the area. So this involved reforestation.

Q: What kind of time frame did you have in mind? Were these programs supposed to have an immediate impact?

COKER: We didn't see anything that had an immediate impact. We considered that everything was going to have to be over the long term. The idea was to lay out programs that would be achievable in five years. Then, in addition, there were a few programs that would take 10, 15, or 20 years to implement. Some of them would take even more than 20 years. If these programs led to the same result, that would be important. If we couldn't show results from these programs over the 5-20 year time frame, we would not be able to generate much interest in them, on the part of those sources from which we would seek the funding. As you probably recall, we had a lot of doubters, beginning with the UN. There was the UN Sahelian Office, which came under the UNDP [United Nations Development Program]. The UNDP people were very doubtful about our intentions. They were trying to convince the various governments of the Sahelian area that an overall Sahelian project would not work. They felt that the way we were going about organizing the project was just going to cause greater problems for them.

Q: What about the World Bank?

COKER: I don't recall that the World Bank was as vocal in opposition to us, as the UNDP was.

Q: But I take it that the World Bank was not very much involved.

COKER: They were not terribly involved. We were in touch with the OPEC countries [Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries]. There were also a large number of countries in Europe that were very helpful.

Q: What was the origin of the Club du Sahel, which was a key factor in this?

COKER: The core for the development of the Club du Sahel was the group of countries interested in trying to assist in solving this kind of a major problem. The French were solidly behind the idea of the Club du Sahel, because of the involvement of the French-speaking countries. They, in turn, were able to generate a lot of interest from other countries in Europe. They also saw the possibilities if we could find ways of minimizing drought and, at the same time, promote other aspects of development in these countries. There certainly was an opportunity for trade. We had a lot of support from the OPEC countries and also from some of the Europeans.

Q: What about the African role in developing this concept and the programs related to it?

COKER: There was some criticism of the idea of a Club du Sahel, evidently in an effort to discourage some of the African governments from looking seriously at what we were proposing. Nevertheless, and somewhat surprisingly, the African governments felt that the idea of a Club du Sahel was something worth considering. Therefore, they were willing to go ahead and allow a serious meeting to be organized to permit these ideas to be discussed. I think that the heavy role that the French were playing in providing budgetary support for the French-speaking, African countries encouraged a number of African heads

of state to give us the time of day, as it were. The French were in favor of allowing these discussions to take place. Therefore, people like Maurice Williams, Anne de Lattre, and Roy Stacy were receptive to the idea.

We asked them to take a trip throughout the Sahel area to try to convey the purpose of the concept which we had in mind, which resulted in a certain amount of acceptance of the idea, even though there was some doubt about whether they would attend a meeting where this idea would be discussed. They were increasingly prepared to attend a meeting to listen to what the group promoting the Club du Sahel had to say. When the Club du Sahel was organized, after a successful meeting at the head of state level, the countries of the area increasingly felt that the Club du Sahel was worth a try. To do nothing at all would have been folly. So they were willing to give the idea a try.

Q: Was that the time when the CILSS (Comit# internationale pour la lutte secheresse Sahel) was formed? Did you have any dealings with the CILSS at this time?

COKER: That was also the time when the CILSS was formed. So you had the Club du Sahel and the CILSS, which were both formed as integral parts of this overall approach to resolving the problems that were emerging in the Sahelian countries.

I think that, at the time, we thought that it was a very effective mechanism. There would be doubters, there would be ups and downs, and there would be some good starts and some slow starts in the process. However, by and large, we had a lot of confidence that this program would get off the ground. We weren't going to give up and we didn't give up.

Q: What was your feeling about the capacity of AID to manage a large and expansive program like this, which covered the whole Sahelian area?

COKER: We were working very hard at trying to rebuild the AID Missions in each of the countries of the Sahel area. We had gone beyond the 40-country limitation of places where we could have AID Missions. The drought hit, and we needed to have a presence

in each of those countries. We had set out to reestablish a physical presence by AID. We had gone to a considerable extent in getting AID personnel reassigned to the area. We were not afraid that we had enough staff to do what would be required. However, we were given additional resources by the agency and by Congress to build up AID's field officers. They basically gave us an open book so that we would be able to recruit people and be able to hit the ground running, as it were. Congress was interested in learning as much as it could about the Sahel area. I was interested in taking an assignment and going out there.

Q: What about the area in which you were particularly knowledgeable? That is, the financial management of the Sahel program. Was there any particular issue in that area that you were aware of?

COKER: When we started to build up the Sahel program, we didn't concentrate on financial issues. These issues did not surface in any serious way until early in 1979 or 1980. However, there were some problems which the General Accounting Office [GAO] had brought out as early as 1974, relating to audit findings about some of the projects and programs under way in the countries which were part of the Sahel area. The GAO had reviewed problems in several of the West African countries. So already, by 1974-1975 we were grappling with about 36 major findings reported by the General Accounting Office. That was something that we were trying to come to grips with and resolve at the same time that we were trying to formulate the Sahel program and get it off the ground.

Those problems came up prior to the development of the Sahel program as such. However, in 1980 there was a second report from the GAO dealing with these problems. Many of them were the same problems that had surfaced in 1974-1975. So we were looking at them again. This time the Sahel program had already been developed. It was operational, and many of the recommendations or audit findings related to the agency's inability to account for funds in the Sahelian countries.

There was a great deal of criticism heard. Congress was threatening to cut the Sahel program. In fact, I was called by James Bond. He was a staff member of the Senate Appropriations Committee. He was a senior staff member attached to that committee. He said that the audit findings pertaining to financial problems which had emerged in the Sahel area were the worst that he had seen in a long time. He said that he would attempt to encourage Congress to cut the Sahel program by more than 50 percent. That was devastating.

Once again, I think that because of this problem I fell back on my financial training once again.

Q: You were in the office during this time?

COKER: Yes. At that point I had come from Ghana and had returned to Washington to deal with the Sahel as the Director of our efforts there. This was in September, 1980. I had been in Ghana between June, 1976, and the end of August, 1980. I returned to Washington as the Director of the Sahel program in September, 1980. That's what I encountered as my baptism back into the Sahel program. I had left this program in June, 1976, just at the point where we were riding high. Then we were told by Bond that Congress, most likely, was going to cut the Sahel program by 50% because of the “devastating” audit findings.

Q: What did you do about these findings? First, did you think that the audit findings were accurate or fair?

COKER: When I looked at the audit findings, and I think that there were about 34 of them, I found that they were very serious. They called into doubt whether or not we were properly protecting the resources provided by the U.S. taxpayers. I saw things that could be done to deal with these findings. However, my immediate problem was with Jim Bond saying that he would make certain that the Sahel program would be cut by 50%. He said

that he was going to entice his colleagues on the Appropriations Committee in the House of Representatives to reduce appropriations for the Sahelian program. He said that we would be in serious trouble on the Sahel program.

You may recall that back in 1980-1981 I set out to try and identify what it was that we could do to turn this situation around. I made a quick trip to Paris to talk to members of the Club du Sahel. I also pulled together, within the Sahel Office, two or three people, including Judy Campaign. From USDA [U.S. Department of Agriculture] I brought in one of their people. I got Mark Matthews from the AID Controller's Office. From the Office of the IG [Inspector General] of AID, I recruited Beckington, or possibly somebody else. I got one of their auditors from the IG Office of AID. We got the Club du Sahel, including Anne de Lattre, to attach two other people to this team which I was organizing.

This team would make an immediate trip to each of the Sahel countries to look at the accounting system that each one of them had. I wanted to find out how many different accounting programs were being used in the various agencies that were implementing part of the Sahel program. I asked the team to come back and identify for me whether or not there was a common problem that these various agencies had.

Q: You mean the African agencies.

COKER: Yes, the African agencies. I wanted to find out if there was a common problem that they were having to deal with in receiving funds from so many different sources. These different sources of funds were requiring them to maintain different accounting approaches. At the same time, as I looked at the problems brought out by this audit, I felt that there were deficiencies associated with a failure to follow up on the collection of information and on the documentation of expenditures. They seemed to be allowing themselves to maintain a questionable type of cash accountability. At the time I used my financial background to set up a group of actions that I wanted all seven AID Mission Directors and their Controllers to undertake in the countries associated with the Sahelian

program. For each one of them I separated out what were the deficiencies in the GAO report that applied to each one of them. I sought to identify what were the common threads across the board and what was individually identified for each country. I gave them a specific time frame for documenting all expenditures, making sure that there was appropriate, physical evidence of invoices supporting expenditures. The failure to do this would represent legitimate, questionable expenditures of funds for which money should be collected.

Now, the action that was taken resulted in a sizable reduction in the amount of money unaccounted for. It brought down by several thousands, if not millions of dollars, money that had been spent for legitimate reasons. There was, in fact, adequate paper documentation for these expenditures which would allow us to remove several of the questionable items mentioned by the General Accounting Office.

We pursued this line of inquiry from October, 1980, through February, 1981. By the time we were ready to go up to the Hill, responding to a call for explanations from Congress, we had documented and verified the adequacy of a number of expenditures, covering sizable amounts of money. We had identified a number of collections on bills that were not properly identified. We had already begun to collect some money in response to those bill collections.

Q: Let me enter here that I subsequent learned that the GAO auditors who wrote this first report had not done a very thorough job of searching the audit trail or the documentation, either because the documentation was in French or was not fully explained, somehow. Therefore, the audit had overstated the problem. There was a problem, but the GAO auditors had overstated it substantially.

COKER: That is correct. The GAO had charged the Controllers and the AID Mission Directors with failing to document adequately these matters to see whether the allegations

were, in fact, accurate. They then discovered that some of the allegations were grossly overstated by the General Accounting Office.

Another thing that we also ended up doing was to put in a procedure which applied to every trainee, every participant, who came from the Sahel countries and who went to a university for any kind of degree training, irrespective of what the degree was for. Under this procedure these trainees and participants were required to take one course in the principles of accounting and one course of financial training in the case of people who were not involved in financial work. We made this procedure mandatory and added additional money in the budget for this kind of training, so that there would be no question of carrying out this program. If we said that we had made arrangements for training individuals who were going off for training, we made sure that we had the resources to arrange for introductory accounting and financial courses. Many of these trainees were the bosses, the people who were running the programs in the Sahel area. They would subsequently come back to their countries with a better appreciation of their role as managers and of their responsibilities for financial matters.

So when we went to Congress to testify on the GAO report...

Q: Weren't there some other actions that you planned to take?

COKER: Yes. We designed a financial management improvement program for the Sahel area. We designed this program but had not yet put it into operation. We did some other things, but I can't recall all of them.

Q: Right. So you took this plan with you to the Hill when you went up to testify?

COKER: I took this plan to the Hill and we were able to show what the situation was when the GAO audit report came out and what was the status of the situation, as of the end of February, 1981. There was such a substantial improvement that the threat which Jim Bond had made to reduce appropriations for the Sahel program by 50% was withdrawn.

So Congress did not propose to cut the Sahel program by 50%. In fact, Congress didn't cut the Sahel program at all. Instead, Congress appropriated additional funds for this program. Congress commended us for the quick action we had taken. Congress felt that we were thoroughly concerned about improving the financial situation affecting the Sahel program.

Eventually, we unified the accounting systems used by the separate agencies in the Sahel countries on the various projects. As a result, one unified system was adopted to provide the information that any of the donor countries needed. So we didn't have to worry about the accounting system used by a given agency to report back to the government in one, particular country. Instead of several systems accounting for the different sources of funds, the agencies could use one, unified, accounting or financial system. I think that that was a major achievement, something that I was very proud of. Q: A remarkable achievement. Isn't it correct to say, as you mentioned, that you developed a major, financial management system for use in the Sahel area?

COKER: Yes. A long term financial management improvement project was funded, which took five years to implement fully. The object was to try to develop and put in place a unified, financial accountability system which, hopefully, would prevent this kind of situation from happening again. I made several trips to some of the Sahel countries and had a chance to talk to the managers and accountants in the different agencies.

During these trips I also discovered that there is a major difference between the ethics of accountants trained here in the U.S. and those trained in the Sahelian countries.

Q: Do you mean those trained in the French system?

COKER: Both French and British accounting systems. I subsequently found the same situation in the English-speaking countries of the Sahelian area. For example, if you are an accountant and you are working in a given office, if your boss tells you to do something, even though you know that his instructions are wrong, as far as financial accounting is concerned, in the use of resources available to that office, you do what the boss tells you

to do. That's one of the reasons why we put in the system of requiring trainees to take a course in accounting and financial management, so that the trainees would have an appreciation of the responsibility an accountant has. His responsibility is to safeguard the resources entrusted to his care. Therefore, his boss also ought to be responsible for helping to do this.

As I had run into this problem with the GAO in 1974-1975 and then, after I saw similar findings when I returned from Ghana in 1980, I asked Congress to incorporate in its report a recommendation that AID Mission Directors and Controllers should be required to certify the financial capacity of local agencies implementing programs in the Sahel area. This was to ensure that the AID Mission Directors and the Controllers stay on top of this situation in their respective countries.

Q: You were the initiator of that concept?

COKER: I initiated that concept. I felt that AID should have appreciated this problem. I had seen this problem develop for a second time. I felt that if we didn't do something about it, this problem would surface again. I suggested that Congress put that provision in as specific language and that this certification should be made on an annual basis. Our AID Missions would be required to make this certification annually.

Q: What was required for the certification?

COKER: What has happened is that the AID Mission Director has been held openly responsible. However, before any given project activities could be allocated to any given government ministry, such as the Ministry of Health or the Ministry of Agriculture for implementation, the Mission Director and the Controller had to go in and interview the local personnel handling the accounting systems and assure themselves that the accounting systems were adequate and that they could account for the activity and document it properly.

Q: And if not?

COKER: If not, the local ministry would not be allowed to receive funds from our sources.

Q: Would you take steps to correct a situation where the accounting system was deficient?

COKER: Yes. We provided the financial management improvement training program. Under it we trained all of the management and financial personnel in every one of the ministries that was given responsibility for implementing any aspect of the Sahel program. This arrangement went a long ways toward resolving the problem that we had previously encountered with GAO audits. I'm fairly certain that it made sure that personnel in the ministries were able to implement, not only their own programs, but also to account for the resources allocated to them on an annual basis by their own governments and to account for project funding from any source.

Q: I recall that the amount of money which the GAO audit claimed was not accounted for was in the range of $10 million. Is that right?

COKER: Something like that.

Q: This amount may be overstated, but that was the scale of what we were talking about.

COKER: Something in that order. However, in my view, before this system was put in, when I rejoined AID on the program side, the situation that I was being asked to work with was just repeating itself. That was a problem that Dave Shear and I were facing at the time. I thought that we had solved the problem at that time, but this was not entirely the case.

Q: Please continue with any other aspects you wish to discuss about the Sahel program. What were they and how did they work?

COKER: Another thing which comes to mind and which, I think, is worth noting is that, at the end of 1980 we attended one of the biennial meetings, held in Kuwait, to try and take stock of the situation affecting the Club du Sahel. It was arranged to have representatives of the OPEC member countries who had been contributing to the fund raising process attend this meeting, along with representatives of the OECD countries. The idea was to see whether or not we were still on track.

That particular meeting reemphasized the fact that we still had a long way to go as far as raising money was concerned. We needed to be able to finance some of the major, infrastructure projects that had to be funded, if we were going to achieve the kind of impact that we wanted to have, in terms of minimizing the effects of the drought then facing the Sahelian region. The question was how we could control and harness some of the water available. So we talked about the situation as it related to the water basins of the area.

One of the basins involved was the Senegal River Basin. Another area concerned the Gambia River Basin. I think that, even though the amounts of money required were astronomical, this did not lead the aid donors to walk away from the project. However, we knew then that a long period of years and a great deal of money would have to be devoted to getting those particular projects under way.

By that time we were faced with the fact that we had to convince most of the aid donor countries and certainly all of the recipient countries that the Club du Sahel and the CILSS were definitely the kind of vehicles needed to assist in combating the effects of drought. They had had experience with drought during the early 1970s and into the mid 1970s. I don't think that anything from the UN made much sense, in this context. That is, anything which went back to what they were trying to do in connection with the Club du Sahel and the CILSS. That problem was probably behind us, as a result of our encouraging more thorough attention to the management of national resources.

I don't recall that we had similar kinds of audit findings, like that of the GAO, which was presented to us in 1980, and which led to the presentation of the financial management improvement project. The development and resolution of this problem took more than five years. By the time that most of this financial management improvement project took effect, I was no longer involved in the area. Occasionally, I talked to some of the people involved with some aspects of the implementation of the project.

These people gave me the impression that the results were proving to be just as we had anticipated. That is, they led to more thorough review by AID management, that is, the AID Controllers and the Mission Directors, and the annual certification that had to be made. They were examining the capacity of the ministries to handle the funds for the various projects, regardless of the sources of the funds, whether they came from government contributions or from the Club du Sahel.

Q: Did you attend any meetings of the Club?

COKER: I only attended the review meeting held in Kuwait.

Q: Why was it held in Kuwait?

COKER: It was held in Kuwait because of the three-way funding of the Club du Sahel. The sources of the funds hosted the periodic meetings. That is, the OPEC member countries, which alternated with OECD member countries, as well as other, recipient countries in hosting the meetings. In my case, as I had come back to dealing with Club du Sahel problems in 1980, when the annual meeting was scheduled to be held in Kuwait, I was fortunate to have a chance to attend the meeting which was being held in one of the OPEC member countries.

Q: Who attended the Club du Sahel meetings? Was it representatives of all 15 countries which are members of the Club?

COKER: There were representatives of each of the donor countries, including the countries belonging to the OECD, the countries belonging to OPEC, and the seven developing countries belonging to the Club du Sahel, who benefited from the resources contributed to the Club. Q: Who chaired these meetings?

COKER: In this case the Paris staff of the Club du Sahel, which organized the meeting. As far as I can recall, and I cannot say that this is completely accurate, there was always a representative of the U.S., which was a key player. The U.S. was always represented at these meetings. In this case the senior U.S. representative was the Assistant AID Administrator for Africa, who happened to be Golar Butcher at the time. There was also a French representative, who represented the other element in the Club du Sahel. There was a representative of the host country, which this time was a Kuwaiti representative. Then there was a representative of the CILSS. They selected one of the heads of state to be their key spokesperson. So there was almost a four-way leadership of the Club du Sahel for this meeting.

Q: How was the dialogue between the donors and the recipients?

COKER: There was nothing that I recall that was contentious. Everything seemed to have gone along in accordance with a prescribed agenda. The agenda dealt with an identification of the problems, the kinds of project activities still in need of assistance, and how they were going to tackle raising the resources for these projects. I think that we came away from that meeting still very enthusiastic about moving ahead with the effort.

By 1980 the Club du Sahel had been in existence for a little more than four years of concerted effort, generating activities and interests but, at the same time, without having gotten any of the major infrastructure started.

Q: The Kuwait meeting was held in 1980.

COKER: Yes. It was after that.

Q: Were decisions made by consensus, vote, or what?

COKER: As I recall, I think that we had a practice of reaching decisions by consensus. However, it did not have to be 100% on the basis of consensus. It was by a consensus involving the agreement of most of those attending. Any opposition was basically considered corridor discussions. No objections were stated publicly.

Q: Do you remember any of the topics or any of the issues that were discussed?

COKER: I guess that the most heated issue involved the size of the commitments to develop the dams and whether or not the Club could truly stay the course and raise such an amount of money. That was a very serious point in the discussions. Everything else was basically considered minor, by comparison. I think that most people went along quite well with what was discussed.

Q: Was there consensus on various sector issues, such as agriculture, health, education, and so on?

COKER: I don't recall any disagreement on these sectors. I think that a good job had been done in trying to identify the various sectors that would need assistance, considering the kind of problem which the various representatives had encountered with the drought. We had a fairly good idea of the areas which needed to receive resources, so this didn't present any particular problem. I think that this was a successful meeting.

Q: Did the African representatives chair some of the meetings?

COKER: Yes. We certainly did not want to exclude the aid recipient countries or minimize their role. They wanted to benefit from the activity of the Club du Sahel. We wanted to

make sure that there was equality in the dialogue and freedom of expression. So each of the recipient countries had ministerial level delegates in attendance.

I'm trying to think whether we had even a head of state attending. I think that the representatives were no higher than cabinet ministers. Q: You were starting to say something about what happened after the meeting?

COKER: After the meeting we had to get down to the point of raising very substantial amounts of money. There were basically two sets of donors: OECD and OPEC. They were trying to agree on just how much each would provide. Then they would go back to the respective capitals and try to determine the justification to be submitted to their legislative bodies to get approval for the amounts concerned.

Q: Did they make pledges of the amount of support needed at these meetings?

COKER: In some instances pledges were made. However, I don't recall that we pledged any specific amount of support. What we did pledge was that we would seriously take the issue before Congress and try to get a sufficient amount of money appropriated for the Sahel fund. So we had a respectable amount of money coming from the U.S. However, I don't recall that we made pledges in terms of specific amounts of money. Those attending these meetings would have loved to have specific pledges. Some countries did make specific pledges. However, I know that the U.S. Delegation was not one of them.

Q: What was the approximate level of the resources that Congress ultimately committed to the Sahel fund? I think that there was a special appropriation. Is that right?

COKER: We had a special appropriation for the Sahel fund. If I'm not mistaken, we provided somewhat more than $100 million. They were talking about cutting this figure in half. That amount of $100 million was to be shared among the member countries of the Sahel area. That did not cover the amount of money that we needed for the major, capital infrastructure contributions. The figure of $100 million would be for other projects that

would be going to the individual countries. That amount of money would be for the different sectors, outside of major, capital infrastructure.

Q: Did we contribute to major, capital infrastructure funding?

COKER: I think that we did, but that came about after my time. We certainly made plans to make such contributions.

Q: What is your view of how that mechanism evolved and worked? Was it a good idea?

COKER: I think that it was a good idea. What it did was to bring together the donors and the beneficiary countries in a very frank discussion, irrespective of what might have been their national interest in relation to certain of the countries. This was particularly the case since a majority of the French-speaking countries benefitted from the Sahel fund. The major exception were Gambia and Cape Verde. So the French had a lot to gain, but I don't think that the donors were concerned about the involvement of French national interests in this respect. The French were playing a rather decent role and trying to make it appear that they were quite objective. So the other donors were trying to do their best to be as effective as the French were, as well.

I haven't been keeping up in great detail regarding what's been going on in the Sahel area since that time.

Q: You had two periods of involvement with the Sahel, right? What was the first period?

COKER: The first period was from August, 1974, to the end of May, 1976, when we were developing the concept of the Sahel fund. In May, 1976, we, along with the French, formulated the idea of the Club du Sahel for the Sahelian countries. We formulated this idea into legislation. I went up to Capitol Hill to present the concept of the Club du Sahel. I sought to convince members of Congress that the concept would work. Then we had the task of convincing the recipient countries, the OPEC countries, and the OECD countries

to accept the idea of their participation in it. Trying to get the concept of the Club du Sahel approved took the initial period of my involvement.

The follow-on period went from September, 1980, to September, 1981.

Q: When you came back to the office concerned with the Sahel.

COKER: Yes. I came back to this office after I left Ghana in September, 1980.

Q: The second period was from September, 1980, until when?

COKER: September, 1981.

Q: Well, this was a short period. Were there any special events during this period?

COKER: The special event involved saving a major portion of the funding that the U.S. Congress would be appropriating for the Sahel.

Q: Because of the financial deficiencies of which you have spoken.

COKER: Yes. And because of the fact that Congress threatened to cut the Sahel program by 50%. This would have taken place in the appropriation for Fiscal Year 1981. We were able to salvage that original appropriation. It was also at that same time that we began the planning for the financial management program for the Sahel.

Q: Well, is there anything else on the Sahel at this point that you would like to mention?

COKER: I think that this episode shows that the U.S. had very strong and effective leadership in terms of its involvement in the Club du Sahel, along with the French. I think that the U.S. and France played a very important role in getting the Club du Sahel accepted, planned, and functioning. It was good to have had a chance to be a part of that program.Mission Director, USAID/Ghana - 1976-1980

Q: Now let's shift to the period when you were in Ghana. What period was that?

COKER: I was in Ghana from June, 1976, until the end of August, 1980.

Q: What was the situation in Ghana at that time?

COKER: Before I went to Ghana Ambassador Shirley Temple Black was the U.S. Ambassador there. General Acheampong and the Supreme Military Council still provided the ruling leadership of the country. Just prior to my going to Ghana, there was also the historical trip to Sub-Saharan Africa, planned for Secretary of State Kissinger. This was the first time a Secretary of State had visited the area. In the planning stage that trip also included a stop in Ghana. All of that was to take place before my arrival there. However, as I had been approved to go to Ghana as the next AID Mission Director, following you, Mr. Haven North, I was keeping track of what was going on.

Lo and behold, before Secretary Kissinger was scheduled to arrive in Ghana, he was disinvited, supposedly by Gen Acheampong and the Supreme Military Council. So Secretary Kissinger was not able to make a stop in Ghana. I understand that he sent a message to Ambassador Black to be given to Gen Acheampong and the Supreme Military Council, expressing his regret at not being able to visit Ghana at that time. It is my understanding that Gen Acheampong may have had an illness which might have consisted of a boil on one of his buttocks which had become inflamed. Whether that was true or not, I don't know. I do know that the students at the University of Ghana staged a march in Accra, the capital, and expressed some of their displeasure, not only with the Supreme Military Council, but their displeasure over having Secretary Kissinger come to Ghana.

Q: Do you have any idea of why they were opposed to his visiting Ghana?

COKER: I wish I could tell you. I don't believe that I ever found out just exactly what their opposition to the Kissinger visit involved. It seemed to me that if Secretary Kissinger's

coming to Ghana would have brought some attention to the ills of having a military government, then that should have been a favorable development, from their point of view.

Several years later I had a conversation with a person who had been a student at the time of the cancellation of the Kissinger visit. This person was later a professor at Howard University. At the time he participated in the student marches against the Kissinger visit. He later told me that the students were marching because of a general dissatisfaction with the Ghanaian military government. He said that they felt that there was no need to be showing further respect for the military government by having the U.S. Secretary of State come to Accra to meet with the leaders of the military government. He said that he thought that the marches against the Kissinger visit were a way of showing to the United States and to the Supreme Military Council that a country as large as ours should not be extending what appeared to be favors toward the Supreme Military Council. So that was the extent of the views of one of the students who participated in the demonstrations against the Kissinger visit. However, I did not talk to any of the other students while I was in Ghana, with reference to this matter.

Q: What was the situation in Ghana when you arrived there in June, 1976?

COKER: I arrived in Ghana on June 13, 1976. Ambassador Black was back in the U.S. on consultations. Prior to my leaving Washington to go to Ghana, it appears that she had asked for her transfer from Ghana. She had asked this of Secretary Kissinger, while he was in Monrovia, Liberia, because he had been disinvited from visiting Ghana. I had several meetings with her in Washington while we were trying to decide what action to take in this regard. She thought that she should ask for her withdrawal from Ghana. Then, when she got back to Washington, she met with Donald Easum, then the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, and other officials in an effort to find different ways of hitting Ghana in the pocketbook, as it were, because the Ghanaian Government had disinvited Secretary Kissinger.

AID officials in Washington were impressing on her the view that the economic assistance being provided to Ghana was basically for the people, and not for the government of Ghana. Therefore, if you talk about withholding economic assistance to Ghana, you are basically talking about denying to the people things that we thought they needed. This assistance was being provided under a government to government program, but it was also from the people of the United States to the people of Ghana.

Knowing that the 200th anniversary of U.S. independence was coming up in July, 1976, in one breath Ambassador Black would be regarded as saying that we should hit the Ghanaians and the Ghanaian Government so that they would feel the pressure and be hurt for having disinvited Secretary Kissinger. At the same time she was saying: “I really want to be back in Ghana to participate in this historic, 200th anniversary, birthday celebration of founding of the United States.”

At this point Don Easum, the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, was saying to Ambassador Black: “You just can't have it both ways.” He was somewhat reluctant to go back to Secretary Kissinger and say that maybe Ambassador Black ought to be allowed to return to Accra and have an opportunity to have an orderly end to her diplomatic mission in Ghana.

In the end Secretary Kissinger approved Ambassador Black's return to Ghana so that she could participate in the 200th anniversary of the independence of the United States and have what she called an orderly withdrawal from Ghana and to say her farewells.

When I arrived in Ghana, Jack Linehan was the Charge d'Affaires. I was therefore greeted by someone I knew from Washington, where he had been working on the Ghanaian desk. It was a good reception for me. Subsequently, Ambassador Black returned to Accra, and we then proceeded with the plans for the 200th anniversary celebration of the independence of the United States. Meantime, there were to be no new obligations to Ghana. This was also the time and the same year when Congress had agreed to change

the ending of the fiscal year from June 30 to September 30. So, when I arrived in Accra in June, 1976, I wasn't faced with the end of the fiscal year a few days later. In fact, the fiscal year did not end until September 30.

As I was not able to obligate any new funds, the basic job was to get on top of my duties and learn what the U.S. aid program consisted of and what things we could do, especially in terms of the operating budget and the programs that were already under way. In other words, what kinds of things could be done from that time [i.e., June 13, 1976] and the end of the fiscal year [on September 30, 1976].

During that period I received a phone call and a visit from the Director of Ghanaian Medical Services about health conditions that might affect the AID Mission. He mentioned a problem that was being experienced in the northern part of Ghana, basically in the Northern Region, in the Bolgatanga area. There had been an outbreak of measles, poliomyelitis, and malaria. The Ghanaian authorities needed money from the U.S. to purchase medicines to treat the people in the Northern Region of Ghana.

Since this was a humanitarian need, I felt that this would probably fall outside the prohibition against incurring any new obligations in Ghana. So we quickly wrote up a justification covering about $300,000 and sent it in to Washington to enable the Government of Ghana to have medicines that could be used for treatment of people in the Northern Region who had fallen ill with these diseases.

When this justification was approved and I received notice of approval, I asked for and had a meeting with Doctor Beausoleil, the Director of Ghanaian Medical Services. I received what was probably the biggest shock and disappointment in my life. Dr. Beausoleil said: “Well, thank you very much for the United States being willing to make this money available. However, I have reconsidered and have decided that people have to die eventually from something and so this is just another of the natural causes of death. Therefore, we do not want this money.” I could not believe that this was coming from the

mouth of a trained, medical doctor and the Director of Ghanaian Medical Services in the Ministry of Health. He was the Director of Medical Services for all of Ghana. There he was, making this statement. That was my initial, rude awakening in dealing with a Ghanaian Government official on a matter which was very much humanitarian in nature. Also, at the same time, it dealt with a situation which could become life threatening.

Q: Do you think that he had other motivations?

COKER: At the time I thought that the motivation was more personal than a matter of anyone in the government pressing him to take this position. I wondered why he was doing this.

Q: But he made a request for help to you?

COKER: He made a request, and that was official. He received an affirmative response. Then he personally told me that he had decided not to accept it. There was nothing that indicated to me that this was a government decision. I saw it as an individual decision. I became more convinced about this because of the second incident that occurred during that same, three-month period. That is, between July and the end of September, 1976. We had a delegation from ORT-America, now ORT-International...

Q: Who is this?

COKER: ORT-International is an organization which is based in the United Kingdom. It originated in Israel.

Q: This was an organization for rehabilitation and training, I believe.

COKER: That is correct. They had been requested to come to Ghana to assist in rehabilitating and re-equipping the operating theaters of several of the hospitals there. That included the Korlebu Hospital. The ORT-International team leader arrived not only with a team of experts but also with the necessary equipment to put the many, non-

functioning operating theaters in the various hospitals back into operating condition. He happened to know the Minister for Community Services in Ghana. Therefore, when he arrived in Ghana, he called on the Minister for Community Services, rather than calling on the AID Mission and the Director of Medical Services.

Q: Was this visit funded by AID?

COKER: AID had some involvement with this visit, through funding that was going directly from AID to ORT-International.

Q: But not from the AID bilateral program as such.

COKER: But not from the bilateral program. So when the Director of Ghanaian Medical Services discovered that the ORT-International team had started out by calling on the Minister for Community Services, and not on him, he became highly offended. He called me at my office and wanted to know whether I had arranged this call. In fact, I hadn't. He demanded that the ORT-International team be sent out of Ghana immediately. Apparently, it did not matter to him that the operating theaters at the hospitals needed equipment to be able to function properly. He was just concerned that protocol had been breached. Once again, you're talking about something personal.

So I finally talked with the ORT-International team and asked them why they called on the Minister for Community Services first. They said that they happened to have a personal relationship with the Minister and, when they arrived in Ghana, they decided to call on him first. However, their job was to restore the six operating theaters in Korlebu Hospital, train the personnel at the hospital, and leave a stock of spare parts for the equipment which they had brought, so that local personnel could maintain the operating theaters.

The team was also going to go out to major, secondary cities in Ghana where there were hospitals and work on the operating theaters there. However, Dr. Beausoleil, the Director of Medical Services, decided that, since the ORT-International team had violated

something that was sanctified, as far as he was concerned, he didn't want the team in Ghana and therefore demanded their departure from the country. And they did depart.

So that was the second incident. In my view that reinforced the view that this was more of a personal, rather than a government decision. Since I knew that the Ghanaian Government hospitals were in such disrepair that many of them could not be used to perform surgical operations, the government would not normally have allowed that decision to be made. I think that the one regret that I have is that I did not immediately take that problem to Dr. Gardiner in the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, one of the principal ministries that we were dealing with. I happened to mention that to Dr. Gardiner several months later. He was furious that Dr. Beausoleil did either of those two things.

There was yet a third decision, in my dealings with Dr. Beausoleil during 1976. There was an outbreak of onchocerciasis in the Lake Volta area. Our AID Mission was again approached to provide some assistance. We contacted the CDC [Center for Disease Control in Atlanta]. We were given approval by the CDC for a program of furnishing personnel and some commodities and equipment. A CDC team would come out and assist the Ghanaian Government with this. When I approached Dr. Beausoleil about approval for this project, he said: “We do not want your personnel here. We only want your money. So if you would just keep your personnel at home and turn the money over to us, we will find ways of taking care of the problem.” Well, the Ghanaian Government didn't have a large enough number of competent, staff personnel to do the various things that needed to be done. This was another case where a problem was identified that needed very serious attention. However, at the same time, Dr. Beausoleil did not feel that he could accept that assistance if it were not provided in the manner which he wanted.

Q: Did we have any ongoing health projects at that time?

COKER: We had ongoing health projects because we had a very large Health Office, headed by Dr. Prince. We not only had health programs. We also had a population

program going. We had also commenced the retail sales of contraceptives. From a regional perspective we were benefitting from a regional health project dealing with onchocerciasis, as related to...

Q: Dr. Beausoleil did not interfere with those projects.

COKER: No, he didn't interfere with other projects. There was no interference with the projects that we had ongoing on a bilateral and regional basis.

The other thing that we had which he did interfere with was that, within the first year after my arrival in Ghana, I met Dr. Oku Ampofu, who happened to be running a center for the scientific study of plant medicine, up in Mampong-Akwapim. As I had visited Dr. Ampofu and his center and had looked at the documentation on how he had described the importance of using traditional healers and traditional plants to treat people and when I heard that this center needed to expand their operations and especially their research, I felt that this was a good area to look at.

While I was doing that, we had a delegation from NIH [National Institutes of Health] come out to Ghana. They were also interested in what Dr. Ampofu was doing. Since we had contacts with Dr. Phillips and Dr. Ofosu-Amah, the Dean and Assistant Dean of the Medical School of the University of Ghana, I had some discussions with them. There was a mixed reaction from the Western trained medical profession as to the suitability of dealing with traditional medicines and how valuable this practice was. They had reservations about whether any resources should be expended on traditional medicines.

I had the feeling that the non-traditional approach to medicine ought to receive our attention and support. So we wrote up a grant for $300,000 to provide funding to the center for the scientific study of plant medicine and to do further research into how traditional, tropical medicines could be used to treat certain known illnesses. Since Dr. Beausoleil, the Director of Medical Services, was in the approval chain for this program to provide his concurrence in providing this money to this center, when the grant for this

center was approved, once again he objected strongly. He solicited a large number of modern, medical practitioners to express their opposition to any donor funding for the center to support research into traditional, tropical medicines. Once again, this was Dr. Beausoleil at work.

Q: Is there anything more you would like to say on the health side of the AID program in Ghana? What about the other projects?

COKER: I think that as far as the other projects are concerned...

Q: What were they?

COKER: We had one project dealing with trying to help the Ghanaian Government decentralize, from the capital to the rural areas, in the economic development field.

Q: Perhaps you could first mention the health area.

COKER: In the health area, as I mentioned earlier, we had one person from Kaiser Permanente helping to improve the planning and management capacity of the Ghanaian Ministry of Health. Dr. Hall and his staff were working on that. I thought that they were doing an excellent job in improving management and policy planning in the ministry. There were some very good, Ghanaian counterpart personnel working directly with Dr. Hall and his staff. These Ghanaians, headed by Dr. Adibo, were very good. They worked very well together.

One thing that we hadn't anticipated was that many of the Ghanaians, when they went to the U.S. for training, did not return to Ghana. At the same time a nucleus of professional personnel trained under this project did return to Ghana and worked on improving the planning capacity of the Ministry of Health. We followed this project to a successful conclusion.

We also had a project with UCLA [University of California at Los Angeles], with Dr. Laurie and his group. They were working on a very large part of this project, which attracted a lot of notoriety. They had a very large staff.

Q: What do you mean by "notoriety?"

COKER: Notoriety, in that they attracted a lot of publicity, and there were a lot of visitors from other countries coming to see them. These visitors wanted to come in and see what they were doing under that project. I couldn't find my records to give you more detail pertaining to this project. I remember the kind of contract staff we had. They were quite active and quite dynamic. We had a fair representation of good projects that were already being implemented in Ghana. They were being implemented throughout the country, to a great extent. They were helping the Medical School of the University of Ghana in several areas. We worked very closely with the Dean and the Assistant Dean on that project.

By the way, Dr. Phillips, who was the Dean of the Medical School at the time, was in Ghana in private practice. Dr. Phillips passed away this month while in London. I ran into him from time to time. In fact, I've been treated by him, since he went into private practice. I also encountered Dr. Phillips' deputy, the former Assistant Dean of the Medical School of the University of Ghana, Dr. Ofosu-Amah, in New York, where he was working for UNICEF [United Nations Children's Fund]. He is now retired from UNICEF and is back in Ghana. Whether he is also in private practice or not, I don't know.

Q: I think that he is at the School of Community Health in the Medical College, University of Ghana.

COKER: Yes.

Q: Well, you may want to talk about ERDM [Economic and Rural Development and Management] or talk about other aspects of the health situation in Ghana.

COKER: ERDM was one of the other projects. It consisted of assisting and aiding, on a decentralized basis, the people in other secondary and tertiary cities in Ghana to manage their affairs and be involved in obtaining services and other economic and social benefits from the central government. We had four people involved, working directly with the community. We were teaching them about the ERDM effort. We had good Ghanaian Government counterparts. George Cann was the Ghanaian Government representative working with us on the management of the ERDM project. We also had people posted in Takoradi, Koforidua, Accra, and Kumasi. They were quite an active group.

Q: What was their function?

COKER: They were functioning as training facilitators for the ERDM project. They were able to work directly with their government and community counterparts. They were almost like community organizers, getting the people to appreciate that there is a role that they could play, on a decentralized basis.

Q: What was the model of the decentralization program? Can you recall any features of it?

COKER: One feature that I recall about it was the question of how you could get decent, community health care in the respective areas. Another question was how could you get transportation services brought to the community level. Another question was how to promote economic activity at the community level. One aspect in particular that I recall is that there were several areas in the country which didn't even have a gasoline station. At the same time, we were being told that many communities had no transportation services because they have to travel so far to get gasoline. They were using their gasoline to go to get gasoline pumped into their vehicles.

Then there were various government services which were being rendered for the larger cities but, at the same time, were not considered for tertiary cities. That is, cities that would

be considered at the third and fourth levels, or small towns. Q: Who were they working with? What were the entities that they were considering?

COKER: They were working with local citizens who seemed to have enjoyed some respect by people in the community as movers and shakers. That is, people who had had some positive impact as leaders in their communities.

Q: Did they have a planning committee or something like that?

COKER: The idea was to encourage them to form planning committees. The purpose was to get these people to understand that there was a need for planning and to train them on how they could plan and how they could participate.

Q: Was there no local government, then, in these areas?

COKER: There wasn't much in the way of local government. There was the central government giving lip service to the idea of local government. However, in fact, local government did not exist, except on paper.

Q: What was the reception for this project in government circles?

COKER: There was a good reception at the local level. There were some doubts as to whether or not this idea could make a difference. In most cases the advisers we had working out there at the local level were able to convince the people to give these ideas a try. Without any doubt they were able to see that the involvement of local people could make a difference and was meaningful because it was possible to get people from Accra [the national capital] to come out to listen to the problems. Several delegations were formed from the decentralized locations and went to Accra to talk to officials at the central level of government about what their needs were.

Q: What was the reaction of the central government? What central government ministry had responsibility for this?

COKER: It was a combination of the Ministry of Local Government and the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning. Policy and guidance were coming from the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning. This ministry worked closely with the Ministry of Local Government. Those two ministries worked very closely with our AID Mission and our project people on the staff. We received mixed reactions on the part of the people in the Ministry of Local Government. This ministry did not want to give up some of its powers.

There were people out at the local level who recognized that certain things needed to be done and, therefore, were looking for more power to implement them. We worked on that matter for about four years. When I left Ghana, this effort was still going on. I subsequently talked to some Ghanaian Government officials about it, and I was told that they were still working on this matter. This was as late as October, 1997! The Ghanaian Government felt that it had still not completed the process of decentralizing power to the local governments.

The principal person on the government side, under the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, was George Cann, who oversaw this project. He was finally seconded to the Ministry of Local Government in 1997 and was asked to find a way of revising the effort that was started back in the 1970's!

Q: Good to have that kind of input.

COKER: Exactly. That was good to know. The government had not given up on this effort.

Q: So, while you were there, the seed of local government reform continued to grow, although slowly.

COKER: We were able to make use of an excellent project design. We were able to get this design staffed out and to get the process of implementation started. So this process was continuing.

Q: What about some other projects?

COKER: If I'm not mistaken, we had an agricultural research project. We were trying to find ways of improving the productive capacity of the farmers. We had agricultural research under way in those geographic zones where many farmers were involved. However, at the same time we had...

Q: Was this part of the "MIDAS" Project?

COKER: It was part of the "MIDAS" Project. I'm glad that you mentioned the name, "MIDAS." I was trying to think of the title of the Project.

Q: "MIDAS" meant "Manage Input and Delivery of Agricultural Services," or something like that.

COKER: Yes.

Q: Maybe you ought to talk about that a little bit, if you remember it, because I think that it was important.

COKER: We had a fairly large division dealing with agriculture. MIDAS was one of their big efforts. There was not only the work directly related to the Ministry of Agriculture. We were also doing work associated with the University of Ghana School of Agriculture. We were also doing some things pertaining to research on how to improve the output in certain areas of Ghana. We did research on the capacity to turn out agricultural produce in certain zones.

I recall the work of the agricultural research people who were stationed in Atebubu. This was a small research station which we had set up, located North of Kumasi, on the road between Kumasi and Tamale. Cotton was being produced in Nigeria. The agricultural research institute down there was named IITA (International Institute of Tropical Agriculture). It provided researchers to operate out of there. We showed a lot of ingenuity in being able to go to a remote area to get this agricultural research started. We brought in about six, very large house trailers from the U.S. and transported them up to Atebubu. They provided not only housing for our staff, but we also had offices and research, all taking place up there in these temporary facilities. We put in electric power, using generators, and dug deep wells to make sure that there was an adequate supply of water.

We were able to undertake a decent amount of research on the various kinds of crops. We wanted to help improve the quality and quantity of the crops produced in Ghana. I'm trying to think of some of the other aspects of the MIDAS project.

Q: Wasn't it "frozen" as a new obligation at the time you arrived in Ghana?

COKER: Money was still available to MIDAS, which was an ongoing project. We had money in the pipeline. Not only was money in the pipeline for MIDAS, but we had money available in the health area as well. So those projects continued on. We just weren't going to be able to put in any new projects. As for the frozen aspect of your question, there was a temporary freeze on new obligations due to Ambassador Black's insistence that the GOG [Government of Ghana] be punished for having disinvited Secretary Kissinger from stopping in Ghana in 1976. The freeze was lifted October 1, 1976.

I recall one of the projects dealing with women. We even started up what I considered to be one of the first small-scale enterprises in the East of Ghana. This involved a cassava processing plant. We had local sheet metal workers down in Tema, producing simple devices to grate the cassava and turn it into powder. This saved local women the time that

they were spending, pounding the cassava into powder form for cooking and, ultimately, consumption. The small factory that we put up served the villages in a 26 mile radius around it.

We monitored the operations of this factory rather carefully and discovered that, eventually, every woman producing cassava within that 26 mile radius was bringing cassava to the plant for processing into powder. As a result, the women found that they had extra time that could be devoted to their children. The women had time to have access to pre-natal care and to health care for their children. In addition, there was an opportunity to teach the women remedial education, working with them on improving their ability to do other work. In short, this freed up a lot of time which the women had been devoting to processing cassava, a key element in the local diet. So it was a worthwhile project. We categorized this project as part of our women's development effort. That was a highly successful program.

We provided a lot of money for applying various kinds of inputs to assist in improving the quantity of crops produced.

Q: What kind of inputs are you talking about?

COKER: Basically, they included fertilizer and insecticides that were not on the banned list of products here in the U.S. We could bring those insecticides in. The idea was to work with the farmers to show that they could increase the yield of their crops by using fertilizer and insecticides. What I don't recall is the cost of the fertilizer that we made available to the farmers.

This was another attempt to privatize the economy. We wanted to have private companies involved in the overall productive process. We provided seeds and fertilizers as well. In some instances there was resistance by the government to our using this private

enterprise approach. Their feeling was that this was taking power away from the government. However, we were able to stick to that approach.

Q: Were you able to privatize any of these operations at that time?

COKER: From what I recall, we did get some of them privatized. A few companies were privatized. We had some difficulties when it came down to the kind of capital they needed, especially using the local banks to provide financing. The interest rates that these local banks wanted to charge were excessive. That made it difficult to get some of the privatization operations going. However, we were able to end up privatizing some of the companies, in cooperation with some companies from the U.S. However, that was a condition that we applied. I don't believe that much of that privatization effort continued on after 1980, particularly when there was a lot of instability with the new government under Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings.

Since I have gone back to Ghana, I have not even looked into whether or not some of those companies which were privatized, dealing with fertilizers and seed at the time, have continued in that status. I assume that they did.

Q: Let's talk about other sectors, and then we can talk about what happened on the general political and economic side of things. Were there any other areas of the program which you focused on?

COKER: We had the DAPIT project and the WHIP project.

Q: I don't understand what that stands for.

COKER: The DAPIT project dealt with developing enterprises concerned with small-scale entrepreneurs and intermediate technology. We had several things going that involved the private sector, including ways to try to get private enterprise accepted and operational

in Ghana. DAPIT was one of the efforts that we were trying to work with. I'm trying to remember some of the elements involved.

Q: Well, we'll come back to that. What happened in terms of the political and economic situation during your time in Ghana? You were there for four years [1976-1980].

COKER: I was in Ghana for four years. Regarding the political aspect, I found that, even though we started out under General Acheampong, a year later [1977] there was a “gentlemanly” coup d'etat, under which Akuffo, and the rest of the Supreme Military Council overthrew General Acheampong. Akuffo and a new Supreme Military Council started work to see whether or not they could carry out certain reforms requested both by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and some of the aid donors. The new Supreme Military Council proceeded to try and work positively with the international financial institutions to bring about some reforms.

At the same time, the new Supreme Military Council was listening very carefully to popular demand for a new constitution that would lead in the direction of civilian government. A new constitution was developed, and the people approved it in a referendum in 1978. The new constitution called for elections to take place in 1979, using political parties. So, in 1979 the Supreme Military Council allowed political parties to be formed, in response to the newly approved Constitution.

This process took place at a time when there was a lot of dissatisfaction within the military itself. This dissatisfaction developed between the Supreme Military Council and Flight Lieutenant Rawlings and some of the enlisted men in the military, who were very displeased with the leadership of the Supreme Military Council. They considered the Supreme Military Council detrimental to the interests of the ordinary citizens of Ghana.

So a situation developed in which Rawlings was arrested and put on trial by the Supreme Military Council. The Council decided that Rawlings would appear to be a madman if they tried him privately. Therefore, the Council felt that it might be to their benefit to try

him publicly. However, when Rawlings was tried openly, he began to talk about the evils of which the military was guilty. He succeeded in damaging the image of the military in the eyes of the people, because they were regarded as more corrupt and therefore were considered to have stolen from the general welfare of the nation. That process played into the hands of the enlisted men in the military, who began to sympathize with Rawlings for his initiative in staging a coup d'etat. It was the view of the enlisted men that the military should be removed from the government, and a civilian government should be put into power.

Rawlings was eventually freed from detention by a group of enlisted men and junior officers, after he had made a widely reported speech at his trial. So that was the beginning of the first Rawlings administration. Rawlings than overthrew General Akuffo and the Supreme Military Council. The enlisted men in the military formed what you might call a kangaroo court, which then proceeded to run the country. They then organized trials without properepresentation for the accused. Then the next thing they did was to execute General Acheampong and the former Border Guard Commander.

Because of protests over this action, a group of ordinary citizens, carrying out their first coup d'etat, staged a series of public marches. They marched first on the Nigerian Embassy, then the British High Commission [equivalent of a British Embassy], and then on the U.S. Embassy. At the time of the march on the U.S. Embassy we happened to be holding a Country Team meeting.

The old American Embassy at that time in Accra was built on stilts. It only had something like a two feet high wall around it. The Embassy grounds and other parts of the Embassy compound were quickly taken over by Ghanaian citizens, most of them students. As a result, we couldn't get out of the Embassy, and they couldn't get in. The students took down the American flag and tore it into little pieces. They came up and knocked on the door and asked to see an Embassy representative. They wanted to send a message back to the President of the United States, Jimmy Carter at the time.

The Political Officer, Edward Perkins, who answered the knock on the door decided that it would probably be best for him to receive a student delegation. He happened to be the tallest person in the Embassy. He asked me, since I was the second tallest person in the Embassy, to join him. So the two of us unlocked the door of the Embassy, and we went out on the first landing of the stairs in front of it to receive a delegation from the students.

The students told us how displeased they were with the American Government which had protested against the executions that had taken place of former government leaders. They said that they felt that those executions were justified and that the Ghanaian military had damaged the good will in which they were held by the people of Ghana. They said that the executions of former government leaders were necessary. They wanted to convey this message to President Carter and asked us to transmit this message to him. They apologized for having torn up the American flag but said that they felt that this was one of the ways of getting our attention.

While we were in front of the Embassy, the second in command to Flight Lt. Rawlings, Bwachi John, flew in by helicopter to a position right next to the Embassy compound. When the people saw that John had landed, they left the Embassy compound and rushed over to where he was, chanting their greetings to him. He came over to the Embassy compound. We let him into the Embassy. He came in and apologized for the actions of the students. He asked that we convey his apologies and those of Jerry Rawlings to the Secretary of State and President Carter. He then dispersed the crowd. So we got off a message back to the State Department reporting what had happened.

Q: Did you accept the petition from the students?

COKER: We accepted the petition and transmitted it to Washington. The Department of State sent back a cable saying that, rather than presenting a demarche to the Ghanaian Government and in the light of the fact that John, the second-ranking official in the new

government after Flight Lt. Rawlings, had come personally to the Embassy to apologize, we should accept his action and go on from there.

Q: It was a nervous moment, wasn't it?

COKER: It was a nervous moment. We didn't know whether the students wanted to burn the Embassy down or whether or not they had guns. Fortunately, they were not in a violent mood. The most violent thing that they did was to tear up the American flag, but nothing more than that.

When the fact that John, the Vice Chairman of the Supreme Military Command under Flight Lt. Rawlings, had come over to the Embassy personally and extended his apologies for what the students had done was reported to the Department of State, we were told by the Department that there was no need to make any statement on what had happened. The Department felt that the statement by John, when he came to the Embassy to apologize for what had happened was a high level message which closed the matter.

In any case in view of the attitude of Flight Lt. Rawlings in coming to power at that time and the fact that the Ghanaian people had voted on a new constitution, providing for an elected government, it was decided that we would support a continuation of the political process in Ghana.

The political parties then took part in national elections. However, no party received a majority of the vote, as required by the constitution, so Rawlings permitted a second round of elections, at which time Limann won enough votes to be considered elected. Somewhat surprisingly, Rawlings kept to his word and allowed the transition to an elected government to go forward.

On this occasion a very colorful ceremony was held in front of Parliament. Rawlings sat in the place of honor, and next to him, on his left, was President-Elect Limann sitting in a noticeably lower chair.

Rawlings got up to speak and talked about the reason why the Ghanaian military had taken over the government. Then he said that he wanted to be very respectful of the wishes of the people. He said that he was turning the administration of the country over to the democratically-elected government of President-Elect Limann. Rawlings held a symbolic staff of presidential authority in both hands. In the military fashion he stepped forward, made a right turn, stepped over in front of President Limann, made another right turn, and reached out with the staff and turned it over to Limann. Then Rawlings backed up, drawing Limann up from his seat, and they reversed positions.

President Limann then held the staff and walked over to the big chair where Rawlings had formerly sat. Everyone applauded, and this ceremony was carried on television. Limann was then sworn in as the President of Ghana and the new chief of state.

We on the U.S. side, because of the stagnation in the Ghanaian economy, felt that we needed to encourage President Limann to take some very firm action to reverse the downturn. There was runaway inflation, already in triple digits on an annual basis, and interest rates were extremely high. Therefore, the value of the assistance that we were providing was essentially less and less significant with the passage of every day. This especially applied to the money which we were providing to re-stimulate the private sector.

In this situation we were fortunate, as you may recall. The Embassy asked for a rather senior U.S. economist, Gus Ranis (Yale Center for Economic Studies), to come to Ghana for a period of time and to be a “senior advisory economist” to President Limann. It appeared, after Ranis arrived, that he was having some success in getting Limann to understand the problems with the Ghanaian economy and some of the macro economic decisions that needed to be made.

Then the Ambassador and I, along with Gus Ranis, were called in by President Limann. He told us, quite frankly, that he was a little afraid of implementing some of the changes that were being suggested. We had also told him, and rightly so, that when the economy

was bad, as Ghana's economy was at the time, the situation would not turn around and become favorable overnight. It was necessary to adjust his grip downward a bit. Therefore, it seemed to him that the advice he was receiving was not working, at least initially. A political leader, understanding what this kind of situation required, had to be extremely strong. He also had to have his party very strongly supportive of him. However, he had to understand that we were talking about a situation which would make matters worse, at least in the short run. It would turn around later on in the medium term (two years or so). President Limann said that he could not accept that. He asked us whether we had heard what President Rawlings said. He said: “We will be watching you.” He said: “What do you think that meant? That meant that he would be watching what we do, and if the economy and the people are hurt, he's going to come after us and take us out to the beach and shoot us.”

Q: Did he really say that?

COKER: He said that and added: “Under the circumstances, I'm afraid to follow any of the advice which you are prescribing.”

Even before we had that kind of discussion with President Limann, we had gotten permission from the U.S. Director, who was in the Department of the Treasury, to meet with World Bank and IMF [International Monetary Fund] officials. We met with them in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, to discuss various measures that could be taken by Ghana, short of devaluation of the currency. We wondered what kind of backdoor measures could be taken which would help the economy and take some of the weight off President Limann and his government, while at the same time accomplishing some of the economic stabilization objectives which we all felt were needed.

None of that served to persuade him that this was the direction he should go in.

Q: Did he ever talk to Flight Lieutenant Rawlings about it?

COKER: He never talked to Rawlings about it. I don't recall that the Embassy was able to have any general discussions about the fact that Rawlings understood what needed to be done. What we discovered was that, when Rawlings launched his coup d'etat, he made the first one of insisting that all essential commodities that were in the retail stores as well as those stored in warehouses should be brought out and put on sale at government-controlled prices. That resulted in depleting all of the consumer goods immediately. So in a matter of a couple of weeks time after Rawlings took over, all of the consumer goods were gone from the market at the controlled prices. At the same time, there was no credit available for the replenishment of stocks. Rawlings had no understanding of economics whatever.

The perceived wisdom among the whole diplomatic community and among the economists was: “How do we get through to this guy? He is completely lacking in any knowledge about economics. What he had done was a clear indication that he lacked any understanding. He completely burned down one of the markets, saying that they were the reason why the national economy was what it was. We clearly knew that that was not the concern. Rawlings just didn't understand the situation. We didn't see that Rawlings had any trusted lieutenants around him. We didn't feel his immediate entourage knew anything about the economy. But this was a serious problem which I kept out of.

When I left Ghana, on September 2, 1980, discussions were still being held with President Limann, in an effort to persuade him to undertake some major economic reform measures. We felt that “hard decisions” would have to be made. Otherwise, we would not see the bottom of the pit in Ghana. The economy was nothing but a big hole. Virtually all of the shelves in the stores were empty. We were still sending 5-ton trucks down to Lome, Togo, once a month, to buy essential commodities as part of the payment for our Foreign Service National staff. We were not going to be able to let up on that. That was still going on when I left. The commodities brought back included soap, sugar, salt, and a variety of other

things, which were distributed to our Mission employees. In addition, we gave them a certain amount of money in local currency.

Q: You mean that you gave this to the Ghanaian staff of the Embassy? This amounted to payment in kind.

COKER: Yes.

Q: Because they couldn't buy essential items in the market?

COKER: They couldn't buy it locally, and therefore we gave them a certain amount in local currency, which was small by comparison to the value of the essential commodities. We had to buy these commodities on a monthly basis.

Q: There was no problem about bringing these essential commodities into the country?

COKER: No problem. We had worked this out with the American Embassy in Togo. At the same time the economy in Togo was booming. Togolese merchants needed to have people buy all of these commodities that were being shipped into Togo.

Q: I gather that the Ghanian Government didn't object to your bringing these items in.

COKER: No, because it was making things better for some people. All of the staff that we had also had family members, so this practice was helpful to them.

Q: What happened to the AID program, in that kind of situation?

COKER: It made us decide, early on, that we had to downsize significantly our effort to try and privatize the Ghanian economy and to make credit available. There was no point in making credit available when, in fact, the capacity of local currency to be productive was being lost. So, basically, the AID program went from a rather sizable amount of money,

on a yearly basis, amounting to about $40-$50 million, down to about $12 million. That happened more or less overnight.

We had one of the AID economists from Washington come out, look seriously at what was going on in the Ghanaian economy, and relate it to the programs that we were trying to run. We wanted him to give us his prognosis of whether or not we were getting any kind of positive results out of the money being invested in the various projects.

The economist happened to be Jerry Wolgin. This was my first encounter with Jerry. He did an excellent job of analyzing the situation. The bottom line he reached was that we might as well eliminate or downsize significantly a lot of the projects which were non social in character. He concluded that there was enough reason to continue with projects which had social significance. These projects were mostly in the health, agricultural, and education areas. In the agricultural area we were doing research.

Q: What was the effect on the projects, even those that you were trying to keep going, given the economic situation?

COKER: Basically, we could not see where we could spend any more money in the credit area. People did not want to take the money offered, since it was repayable at extremely high rates of interest. It was just too costly for the companies concerned.

Q: What about technical assistance activity?

COKER: Technical assistance activity involved our own people, and they were able to continue. Some of these activities were reduced in scale. For example, there was the ERDM project. We continued that. We still had four consultants in Ghana. What they were trying to do in the field of decentralization basically had no negative impact, such as that which affected the economic projects. The same consideration applied to the agricultural research project. Benefits were derived from this research, but there was little or no cost impact from this project.

There was no negative impact even from the health project, where we were trying to improve health management practices. We already had a certain number of Ghanaians who had been trained in the United States and had returned to Ghana. However, because of the cost structure in Ghana, we had some turnover in terms of personnel. Much to our surprise, many individuals whom we were counting on to return to Ghana after their training in the U.S. did not, in fact, come back. They evidently felt that the economic situation in Ghana was very bad and they wondered how they would be able to help their relatives. If they returned to Ghana, they would be in the same position as their relatives who had remained in Ghana.

So we saw some programs being affected by the situation to the point where we were required to reduce the number of advisers we had in Ghana.

Q: The cost of doing business in Ghana must also have gone up, due to inflation.

COKER: The cost of doing business in Ghana was extremely high. Therefore, we were getting less output on the ground. Rents on properties went up, and the cost of utilities went up. I would say that it was virtually impossible to buy any kind of locally produced commodities for the projects. Everything had to be shipped in, so we had added costs associated with that. We had been doing most of this, in any case, by importing commodities.

Q: Did you have any programs that were dependent on imports? For example, PL 480 commodities [surplus agricultural commodities from the U.S. which were sold in country].

COKER: We had PL 480 commodities brought into the country. These commodities were provided under the WFP [World Food Program] to assist in reforestation, for example. Many of those commodities, to our surprise, were being sold in the commercial markets. This caused a problem for us because we had Peace Corps Volunteers in Ghana, many of whom were really suffering. They were buying U.S. donated commodities in the

commercial markets in the various villages. Some of the Peace Corps Volunteers were writing letters to their Congressmen about the apparent diversion of U.S. commodities. These commodities said: “Free” on the outside of the packages and sacks but were actually being sold on the local market. These sales involved vegetable oil and other commodities, which they were able to buy in the market.

As you may remember, many Congressmen got in touch with your office to complain of this situation. As I was USAID Mission Director in Ghana, I was asked by various Congressmen to prepare suggested replies to letters sent to them by their constituents living and working in Ghana. Fortunately for us, a Regional Office of the IG [Inspector General] was located in Accra. So I persuaded the head of that office to send a couple of their investigators out to check into the situation in the commercial market and buy some of these commodities. We then took down the stock numbers, because we wanted to find out exactly which program these commodities had come from. We were able to trace some of these commodities to the World Food Program.

Q: The World Food Program?

COKER: Exactly. The fact is that this WFP and was related to the cost of rehabilitation of the forestry program. I confronted the local representative of the UNDP [U. N. Development Program], who, in fact, was the director of the World Food Program in Ghana. He arranged to have the director of the World Food Program, who was actually his deputy, look into this operation. [Ginni Brodersen] Holthausen was the UNDP Permanent Representative at the time. I brought all of this to his attention and indicated that he should monitor the traffic in these commodities much more closely.

We received strong objections from the WFP Director in Ghana, Holthausen, saying that this was not their responsibility and that we should not be concerned. Once the commodities were received by them from the ship in the harbor at Accra and they released these goods, that was the end of their accountability. I reported on this situation back to

Washington and asked that our concerns should be conveyed to our representatives in Rome, at the headquarters of the FAO [Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations].

The next thing I heard was a letter from Holthausen in which he howled and screamed that we were traitors and were causing the WFP program unnecessary grief because the headquarters of the FAO in Rome had gotten in touch with him on this matter. FAO headquarters in Rome had indicated to the WFP in Ghana that they had a responsibility to monitor the disposition of these commodities. I think that that was the end of the initially cordial relationship that we had with the WFP. However, I could not have cared less. My job was to make sure that there was proper accountability for these commodities.

At least we were able to show that the commodities involved in this traffic did not come from the AID-run PL-480 programs.

Q: What was our PL-480 assistance being used for?

COKER: We still had the maternal and child health project. Part of that was involved in this program. Despite the problems, there was no famine in Ghana.

Q: Were we still conducting school feeding programs?

COKER: Those continued, as did the maternal and child health program. So education and health related programs were still in operation.

Q: There was another project which you might have become involved in. It was providing support to locally-active NGO's [Non Governmental Organizations], particularly in the field of agriculture. What happened to that project? Could you describe it to some extent?

COKER: We were able to get one particular organization, TECHNOSERVE, up and running. We had one project in which we used TECHNOSERVE as a U.S. resident NGO. It was well respected in Ghana. It was given an umbrella-type grant to assist in

building up the capacity of the local NGO's. This also included its being able to provide assistance in organizing and running projects and programs that not only were related to agriculture but also to technology transfer in small-scale, micro type businesses. We had a good relationship with TECHNOSERVE, which has continued even until today, from the standpoint of the relationship between TECHNOSERVE Ghana and the USAID Mission.

We see this relationship today. We have seen it over the past five years, as far as USAID use of TECHNOSERVE in the micro-enterprises program in Ghana is concerned.

This week, just to digress a bit, our company, AMEX, is launching a workshop for the implementation of the second phase of the private enterprise project. We need to work on small and medium scale enterprises. We deal with micro-entrepreneurs in the areas of agriculture, wood, metal, and textiles. It is TECHNOSERVE that identifies the micro-entrepreneurs in the agricultural business and determines whether or not they are suitable to go into the export field. TECHNOSERVE then identifies the companies it considers suitable and refers them to AMEX. All of this activity is funded by USAID. So the relationship with and the use of TECHNOSERVE has continued.

We also had a project in which we funded a large scale farmer up in Ejura [central Ghana], who identifies certain plots on this farm. He was able to furnish certain services to smaller scale farmers in his area. In that situation we learned how to teach farmers who are not accustomed to the use of modern technology and who have not learned the value of properly using production inputs. We used experienced farmers for this purpose. In this case we had the use of an area of farm land close to 5,000 acres in extent for demonstration purposes. All of the farmers in that geographic area offered to participate in this demonstration. The farmers in the Ejura area, regardless of what we thought of them, were able to plow the land and otherwise prepare it, as well as provide the production inputs. And, lo and behold, we got sizable production out of each one of those farms. What these farmers said to me was: “We could, in fact, use a large and more successful farmer, if he were truly willing to train and bring smaller farmers along to the point where

they understand and appreciate the kinds of 'inputs' and technology they need to use to achieve greater production." Those farmers were able to pay back the credit that they had received. In fact, everything was based on credit. What they produced they were able to sell and pay off the loans that they had received.

We had problems with the Ejura farm people, the major project that they were trying to run, and the resources they were trying to get from AID. However, there was one component that...

Q: I'm glad to hear this. They went bankrupt three times during my time in Ghana. It was an example of large unit, private agricultural investment. It was a sad story. Extraordinary efforts were made, but there were problems with it.

COKER: But there was one good aspect...

Q: I'm glad to hear that.

COKER: That came out of it. I was quite reluctant to have any dealings with the Ejura farm people. I just felt that they were a bunch of shysters. However, when they came in with that idea, Oleen Hess, a few others, and I decided to use this as a demonstration activity.

Q: Hess was the chief of the Agricultural Section of AID, wasn't he?

COKER: Yes. He was extremely good. Fortunately, he was there, and I was able to use him to work very closely with this.

Q: You had an OICI [Opportunities in Industrialization Center International] project there, I guess. How was that working?

COKER: That continued to be a very effective program.

Q: What was its role, what was it doing?

COKER: OICI ran a program of vocational education and, at the same time, various kinds of training related to different industrial skills. These skills included those of electricians, plumbers, brick masons, auto mechanics, and all down the line. We had probably one of the first examples of taking in females as well as males. We took in more people than we had slots available.

We saw a willingness on the part of the Ghanaians to learn vocational skills, because these were skills truly involved with building a nation. There were many areas in which the graduates of this program could then go out and start small scale businesses on their own.

Q: Did that happen?

COKER: It did happen. Numbers of people were trained as plumbers and electricians, auto mechanics, and brick masons, and they established their own businesses. They added a component to that OICI program on how to become an entrepreneur. So many of these people also took advantage of receiving training in entrepreneurship. What they discovered was that, with a small amount of money, they could go out on their own and start up these enterprises. That was a very effective program, and it is still going on today. Q: Do they have more than one training center now? It was just based in Accra in the early days of that project.

COKER: The center was based in Accra, but the Board of Directors voted to open up two additional centers. If I'm not mistaken, one was located in Kumasi, and one was for the Cape Coast. They were working on expanding those when I left Ghana. However, this expansion had been voted on and approved by the Board of Directors, which had a majority of Ghanaians on it. The different communities had also formed governing boards and had approved the expansion. There was a requirement for some government input, which was very slow in coming, because of the tightness of resources available.

Q: Was this largely a USAID plan? Was there no other funding source?

COKER: There were some funds coming in from private enterprises which also were concerned about being able to have access to some of the graduates of the center. However, most of the resources came from USAID, through OIC-International. If it were not for that, the OIC center would have foundered long ago. Now there is no USAID money flowing through OIC-International. All of the funds are being generated locally.

Q: From AID locally?

COKER: No, generated either by government subsidies or money generated by the Board of Directors, from local resources.

Q: Potentially, this is locally financed and self-financed now, and no longer based on AID support.

COKER: Yes.

Q: So it has sort of spun off into...

COKER: It has spun off into a self-sufficient, locally financed type operation.

Q: Do you know the number of people who are going through this program?

COKER: I talked to John Moses, who was, as you recall, the dynamic chairman back in our days. He is still intimately involved with it. They still have a very large intake of people, over 200 annually. They've been able to graduate over 6,000 people who are sought often for jobs, even while they are in training. They get jobs as apprentices as soon as they finish the course. They are given regular jobs, making good money. Many of them are self-employed. They don't have enough slots for trainees. OIC-International was fully subscribed.

The Ghanaian Government was finally convinced that there was a need to add vocational training to the national educational program, because we were not coming anywhere

near the needs of the nation in teaching the kinds of skills being generated by OIC-International. However, at the same time, the national economy has been in a boom and has experienced strong growth since about 1986. When you go to Ghana, you see all kinds of job vacancies being advertised on all kinds of construction sites. There are signs out on the road, saying: “We need plumbers, electricians, and brick masons.” Yet, at the same time there are large numbers of recent graduates from the schools, standing around on the street corners, selling merchandise of one kind or another. They would love to be attending one of these vocational schools, doing meaningful work. However, there was no national system for training them. The Ghanaian Government had not been able to develop additional, vocational schools and fund them to the point where they could have a meaningful number of graduates who could be employed in jobs of this kind.

Q: The government does provide subsidies to the OIC.

COKER: The government provides support to the new, vocational education schools...

Q: But no government funding for the OIC schools?

COKER: Not for the OIC schools. If there is government funding, it would be infinitesimal.

Q: Could money for the OIC schools be privately raised?

COKER: All of the money privately raised that I know of, when I talked to people about this, was provided for certain services that they rendered, in the form of fees paid for those attending. That was another way of generating funds. However, I wouldn't be surprised if by now there were small, government subsidies for these vocational schools. I haven't heard any details of such subsidies.

I went to Ghana in July-August, 1997 to do an evaluation on a sustainable employment-generation project. This was funded by the UN. That's when I got to know about new Ghanaian Government policies to start up and expand a national system of vocational

education. At the same time I saw controversies going on in the government ministries on how to handle this matter and who should be responsible for this program. Here in the U.S. vocational education usually comes under the local educational authorities.

Over in Ghana they're still arguing about which ministry should be in charge of vocational education. If you go back to the colonial days in Ghana [or Gold Coast, as it was formerly called], the Ministry of Education had responsibility for one form of education. Vocational education was not a part of this program. Vocational education was looked down upon. So they were talking about forming a separate, autonomous body to be responsible for vocational education. However, this proposed new body is still trying to get off the ground. It doesn't have the necessary clout. It can't compete for resources with the national Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education has substantial resources, since it is an established government department.

Q: Do you know whether any of the approaches or concepts that the OIC was using in its vocational training program were being picked up by the national, vocational training program?

COKER: The national, vocational program had adopted some of the curriculum from the OIC vocational training schools. There was a lot of respect for OIC-International. However, I felt that with that much respect, the national vocational program could have put money into the OIC vocational training program, effectively saying: “Why don't we just spread this program across the country?” But the political infighting was an obstacle to that kind of approach. What the educational authorities concluded was that they should form another institutional system parallel to the system of the Ministry of Education, but devoted strictly to vocational education.

Q: I recall that OIC people were fearful of government funding because of earlier experiences in which the government simply took over vocational training and de-

emphasized it. So the OIC people were not eager to seek government support. I don't know whether you picked that up or not.

COKER: I didn't hear that, but I know that the OIC people didn't discuss government involvement in the vocational training program. They didn't seem to want government involvement. So I would think that this feeling is still there. However, everyone seemed to agree that vocational education should be greatly expanded, if they were going to get on with the job of nation-building and, at the same time, provide jobs for the unemployed.

Our evaluation committee made a strong recommendation tharesponsibility for vocational education at the national level should be transferred to the Ministry of Education. We recommended that every effort should be made to ensure that vocational education is truly and substantially funded, so that it can be an effective force in the community and get people trained.

Q: Well, were there some other projects of interest to you at that time and which you were concerned with? You've covered quite a few.

COKER: Education and human resources were always a big part of our effort in Ghana. You may remember that we had a Ghanaian training officer, we had a “Women in Development” program, even though we were trying to include women in our main effort.

Q: Were you able to do that even in the “Women in Development” program?

COKER: Fortunately for us, we had hired one of the Head Mistresses from La Croix Academy, Joanna Laryea. She was a very dynamic person who truly had good contacts among the powers that be in Ghana. She came to work for AID in 1977. She just retired last year, in 1997. I happened to be in Ghana when she retired.

We had quite an involvement with Ghanaian women. We were funding what I considered micro-enterprises for women. It was easy for Joanna, who knew many Ghanaian women.

We had a considerable number of delegations of Ghanaian women come to our office, or we were invited to meet with them elsewhere, and discuss the ideas which they had. We had a very strong following among the Ghanaian women. You probably remember a little, dynamic woman, Esther Ocloo. We were considerably involved with her in her food processing program. She has acquired recognition and even world renown in this respect. Even the World Bank and other institutions have sought her views on the role of women.

We had some textile projects that were also funded. What we attempted to do, as part of the program for bringing women into the mainstream of our efforts, was to make sure that we had components, within our projects, for women and which we could finance. I'm sorry to say that I can't recall many of the detailed efforts we made in this connection. However, I remember that most of them were related to identifying some kind of employment opportunities on the ground, dealing with micro and small scale programs for women.

At the same time we had Joanna Laryea working very closely with the other sectors in the AID Mission. We had divisions in the AID Mission dealing with educational resources, agriculture, and health. Joanna also worked out of the AID Program Office, so she was working with most of the line divisions, as well as the staff divisions, to find programs to improve ways of getting women involved. There certainly was nothing political about this. Everything at the time was simply how we could get more women to recognize how they could participate in the various projects. Joanna became a very good source of advice for that.

Q: How would you characterize the impact of the kind of development programs we had? How did you see this impact then and also later on? We could cover that later, but since you're talking about it now, in what ways do you consider that these programs contributed to Ghana's development?

COKER: I had very different views of our aid program prior to my arriving in Ghana, during my time there, and even afterwards.

Out of the number of people that we sent off for training, some of them returned to Ghana. Some left the country because of the economic conditions there but subsequently returned. When you are in Ghana, you run into a lot of people who are pressing ideas on you, ideas that we think may have come from exposure and involvement in the AID program. This is particularly true for those people who were involved in the educational process in the U.S. They were necessarily involved with the leadership of Ghana. They were among the reasons for Ghana's economic growth, if not where it is now. They had some ideas on private enterprise.

I found that the Africans were very much oriented toward entrepreneurship. If they had the means, they had no problem in getting on with entrepreneurship. I think that the Ghanaians probably have a fear of economic downturn and changes in government. They really want to see things work well. Many of them have been exposed to the way things are run in the U.S., especially how dynamic the U.S. Constitution is. They're looking for something quite similar to take hold in Ghana.

We have seen many of the physicians who were somewhere associated with the project over in Ghana. Others might have come out of Ghana and gone through their medical training in the U.S. They were very much private enterprise oriented. They opened up their own medical practices.

There are a lot of positive things that seem to be going on, including economic decisions and the view that it is better to leave decisions regarding growth in the hands of private entrepreneurs, rather than in the hands of the government. So you have a tremendous divestiture effort under way to see how they can get the private sector involved. We would like to think that we had some measure of success in the approach that the Ghanaian Government is taking now in getting itself out of running enterprises which can best be operated by the private sector. These ideas relate to agriculture and farming. I think that some of that has rubbed off on the Ghanaians. They have a lot of private, seed companies

and other companies related to agribusiness now, which is important. You see things like that taking place.

Overall, there is a very positive image that we have left with the Ghanaian people. We can be thankful that the Ghanaians who left the country have since observed a change in the attitude of the government, which is now much more open. They are willing to go back. You can run into Ghanaians all over the world. If you ask them whether they are anxious to go back, all of them will tell you that they are willing and want to go back. They just hope that they can go back and survive. So I find that a very positive development.

Q: Well, let's just leave it at that for now. You can add to it if you like. What month and year did you finish your tour of duty in Ghana?

COKER: I finished up at the end of August, 1980, and came back to Washington to be the Director of the Sahel Program.

Q: We talked about that period, I guess, and we can add to that. Then when did you finish working with the Sahel Program?

Returned to USAID/Washington as Director, Development Planning, Africa Bureau - 1981

COKER: I worked on the Sahel Program from September, 1980, until approximately June or July, 1981, at which time I went over to the Development Planning Office [DP].

Q: How did you find that assignment?

COKER: I found that job was multifaceted. However, basically, it was right in the guts of the Africa program. At that time I was involved in developing resource requirements for the Africa program, either in Washington or overseas. We were developing the budget for the whole Africa Bureau of AID and the justification for that budget. I was dealing directly with

AID Missions around the world and their projections of what their needs were going to be. I was also dealing with AID Washington.

I was responsible for coordinating and assembling what the requirements were. At the same time I was responsible for putting the overall AID budget together for the Africa Bureau, as a part of the agency's budget. I had to work directly with PPC [Program Planning] which, in turn, was getting its instructions directly from OMB. That is, guidance on the preparation of the upcoming budget. I had to work out the timing for getting all of that information together, in detail, and then getting it up to what the OMB considered the bureau's budget for the upcoming fiscal year, at one remove. I also had to help in the preparation of testimony and how we were going to present this testimony to both the House of Representatives and Senate authorization and appropriation committees.

I had to work on the legislature language we wanted in the bureau, as well as the kind of appropriations that the administration was seeking. I was intimately involved in discussions with the different staff committees on the Hill. I had to develop a relationship with OMB and people over there who were interested in the AID side. They might have been designated, within OMB, to be the persons in touch with the AID component.

At the same time we had other responsibilities in dealing with the economic side. We were responsible for looking into economic policies and practices which should relate to the Africa Bureau, as dictated and formulated by PPC and the Central Bureau of AID. We were also responsible for developing a projection on the evaluation plan for the fiscal year to come.

I found this a very central resource management tool, from a financial and programmatic point of view for the Africa Bureau of AID and for the overall agency.

Q: Was there any particular development strategy or policy that the Africa Bureau was following at that time which stood out in your mind? This was in 198- what?

COKER: This was in 1981, from mid 1981 until 1982. That was at the beginning of the Reagan administration. That was also a period of time when we were basically re-examining our program to decide on the direction that things would be going, under a Republican administration.

Q: What kind of initiatives were you taking in response to the Reagan administration? Do you remember?

COKER: I know that the Sahel Program continued. I can't say that I remember anything else in particular, in the way of new initiatives.

Q: Were you involved in testifying on the Hill?

COKER: I was involved in testifying on the Hill.

Q: How was that experience?

COKER: Since I had been involved in testimony from the side of the Sahel Program, I found, in giving testimony from the DP side, that I already had had a little acclimation and exposure. However, I found that dealing with the testimony before the various Congressional committees at the Bureau level was a much more intense experience. You had to anticipate questions and work directly with Congressional staffers. In dealing with the Hill as Director for Development Planning for the Africa Bureau, I had the chance to meet the senior staff aides for the different Congressional committees. It was possible to develop a good, working relationship with the committees by establishing a practice of briefing them on why we were asking for certain things, answering the various questions that they had, and giving them a better understanding of what the AID African Bureau's requests were. If members of the committees or committee staffs had any particular concerns, they felt good about being able to raise those concerns with me. If they didn't like the answers they got, they could pursue the matter further. I was able to develop this kind of relationship so that, when I went up on the Hill to testify, many times they would

give me a telephone call in advance and ask if there were any questions which I would like to have asked, so that these would form a part of the record of committee proceedings. This way, we could make certain that these questions were asked. So I felt that this experience was very worthwhile.

I enjoyed being up there on the Hill in support of the Assistant Administrator and the Deputy Administrator, who were doing the actual testifying. We would prepare a briefing for both of them. We would have dry runs in advance and go through the anticipated testimony. Then I would accompany them up to the Hill and provide support for questions they were being asked. Sometimes, they were rather touchy questions.

Q: Were there any particular issues which you had to deal with or particular initiatives during that time?

COKER: No, other than what might have been expected with regard to the Sahel program. I don't recall that there was anything in particular during that period of one year, when I was Director for DP, which was unusual.

I know that the new administration at the time [the Reagan administration] was trying out new initiatives. What those initiatives were I basically do not recall.

Q: We can come back to that later, if you wish. What about your involvement with the State Department?

COKER: Oh, that's another aspect of it. Our counterpart on the State Department side was the Bureau of African Affairs. We worked very closely with the principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, as well as the Deputy Assistant Secretary who dealt with economic matters. We also dealt with one or two of the Deputy Assistant Secretaries of State who were concerned with other aspects of programs at the geographic levels within the continent of Africa. These included the Office of West African Affairs, the Office of East

African Affairs, and the Office of Southern African Affairs. We had some contacts with them.

We sought the support of State Department people as to what we were doing. When problems came up and we felt that the State Department should lend its support to help us deal with certain problems, we didn't hesitate to call them. There were also instances when the political side of AID might try to impose its will on those of us who were bureaucrats. Sometimes, we thought that what they were trying to do would be detrimental to the AID program.

We didn't hesitate to ask one of the Deputy Assistant Secretaries of State to meet with the political appointees on the AID side, basically to try to set the record straight.

Q: Do you remember any particular issue in this connection?

COKER: I recall that when Princeton Lyman was one of the Deputy Assistant Secretaries in the Bureau of African Affairs in the State Department, certain pressures were being applied by the Assistant Administrator of AID for Africa, in a manner which we felt would be injurious to the program. We informed Princeton Lyman about the background to this matter. I don't think that this would necessarily have been considered an example of highly professional conduct. However, we felt that it was more protective of what we needed to do. Therefore, we arranged for Princeton Lyman to meet with the Assistant Administrator of AID, who was a political appointee. We needed to have Lyman say that the State Department was not necessarily in agreement with the line that the Assistant Administrator was pushing.

Q: Do you have a specific example of that?

COKER: Here was an emergency humanitarian crisis in Ethiopia. The then political administration of AID did not wish to consider aid to the Marxist Ethiopian government. We tired to convince them that the assistance was for the people. Eventually, they had to

reverse their stand and provide humanitarian assistance. I personally remember getting in touch with Lyman on an issue of this kind. I also found that we had some issues which, because of the role that this position (Associate Assistant Administrator for DP) had, we met with our counterparts in other geographic bureaus.

Q: In AID?

COKER: In AID. We would hammer out some of the problems we were having and which needed some attention. Most likely, this would have required some attention by PPC [Program Office in AID]. We would meet and work out what it was that we wanted and why we wanted certain things. Then we would have a combined meeting with PPC and would lay out our position and what we were looking for. On many occasions we would do this without PPC being aware of the advance planning that we had undertaken in this connection. We felt that we had to go into a meeting of that kind on a unified basis to deal with policy issues when PPC was involved. Otherwise, we wouldn't have the necessary majority to deal with the matter. Unless we prepared our path carefully, we couldn't get PPC to listen very seriously to what we had in mind.

Q: Anything else on your Program Office functions or shall we move on to your next assignment?

COKER: Well, that Program Office position lasted about a year, but during that time I was interested in going back overseas. I was approaching 50 years of age. I knew that I wanted to retire and go back to the private sector as soon as possible. So I began to press to obtain a position overseas. I thought that, perhaps, 1983 would be a good year to go back overseas.

I began to have discussions with the Deputy Administrator of AID about positions that were becoming available in 1983. In the Asian Bureau of AID I was interested in the position of AID Mission Director in Sri Lanka. In the Latin American Bureau I was interested in the position of AID Mission Director in Jamaica. The tours of assignment of the current

AID Mission Directors in both of those countries were coming to an end in 1983. The AID Mission Director in Jamaica was finishing up two tours of duty there. In the case of Sri Lanka, the AID Mission Director, who previously had been the Deputy Mission Director, became the Mission Director while she was there. I felt that she was coming to the end of two tours as Mission Director, but in fact she was coming to the end of three tours of duty on her assignment to Sri Lanka.

I was also looking at the possibility of an assignment as an AID Mission Director in the African Bureau. I know that we had made a decision in the Bureau to have a new person assigned as AID Mission Director in Uganda. We had been having some difficulties in finding somebody who wanted to go there, voluntarily, as Mission Director. So for Africa I had listed Uganda as my first choice, on condition that AID could get the State Department to agree that, if we could get additional funding, we could also get additional staff in the AID Mission, enough to run a larger program there. So my sights were set on Uganda in Africa, Sri Lanka in Asia, and Jamaica in the Latin American Bureau.

Meanwhile, an offer came up in 1982 for long term training. I was told that I was one of the choices to take long term training. Peter McPherson, the AID Administrator, felt that I should go to the University of Chicago to study economics under Milton Friedman.

Q: Interesting.

COKER: I did not particularly want this training assignment at the University of Chicago. I felt that, if I were to take long term training, I wanted to get a master's degree within the 12-month period I would be assigned to it. I was able to go to the Director of Training at the time and said that, in view of my economics training, with an undergraduate degree in accounting, with only a minor in economics at the undergraduate level and an MBA [Master's Degree in Business Administration] in management and high finance, I knew that I could not get a master's degree in economics in 12 months' time, at a school like the University of Chicago. When AID checked with the School of Economics at the University

of Chicago and gave them my background, they came back and said clearly that it would be virtually impossible for me to get a master's degree in economics in 12 months' time.

Attended SAIS/Johns Hopkins - 1982

That view was conveyed to Peter McPherson, and he decided that I should have the choice of selecting a school in this area. So I selected Johns Hopkins University.

Q: At SAIS [School of Advanced International Studies].

COKER: At SAIS. So I worked in the DP office in the African Bureau in June, July, and part of August, 1982, while I started into summer school at SAIS. In fact, that was the first time that I had ever attended summer school, from public school days through college. However, I felt that this was the only way that I was going to finish work on my degree by May, 1983. It had to be done that way. So Johns Hopkins was willing to work with me.

Q: What kind of course did you take at Johns Hopkins?

COKER: Basically, I took macro and micro-economics. I followed a program of study dealing with African affairs. However, by and large those courses were in the discipline relating to economic development. That's where my interest was, and I felt that, having finally gotten my studies on the program development side, that's what I wanted to do.

Q: Was there any particular development philosophy that was being provided in the course?

COKER: I would say that the course prepared the students in general for understanding the kind of macro and micro decision-making and policy problems that developing countries were encountering. Also, at the same time, Johns Hopkins was trying to give the students a feel for why the international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the IMF [International Monetary Fund] were pushing for the kind of economic policy changes that were being asked of the developing countries. The direction of the course

emphasized trying to orient the students toward developing society in the developing countries. At the same time it gave the students an exposure to what are the generally accepted, economic standards and policies and the impact which certain decisions would have on national economies.

Q: What did you find was the main benefit of your year of study at SAIS?

COKER: It gave me a chance to recall some of my earlier economic training. However, at the same time I became aware of the economic aspects of the development assistance work which I had been doing in AID. It made me more aware of why the decisions which the international financial institutions were imposing, or trying to get the recipient governments to accept, were important. It gave me an opportunity to see how micro and macroeconomics tied in together. We had to study matters at the microeconomic level of various sectors and how that would impact the economy.

Q: Did you write a paper?

COKER: I wrote a paper on the economic problems of Ghana since its independence and the role that the international financial institutions had played in the overall scheme of things in Ghana. I was trying to get some feel for the forces that were at play in Ghanaian society and impacting on its leaders throughout that period, as well as the conditions that existed at the macro level. I studied the hard decisions that had to be made and why it was that the people in political power were not anxious to make those necessary decisions and what conditions affected those changes.

That orientation went back to something quite dear to my heart. This meant looking at the IMF and the World Bank in Ghana, in the context of “to be or not to be.” This was the title that I gave to this paper.

I found that much of my exposure at SAIS was quite valuable, against the background that I had at the time I began studying there, after coming directly out of West Africa

and my involvement in Development Planning and the Sahel program. This impression was reflected in the various courses that I took. Among the professors I found that they recognized the degree of practical experience that those of us from AID had gained from our service in the agency.

Many of the professors were dealing with certain topics in the various classes. They would take the opportunity to ask those of us who had had practical experience to relate this practical experience to what the subject matter was which was being taught. That was quite beneficial. It brought in the practical aspect...

Q: Of the real world.

COKER: Yes, of the real world. Many of the students who attended classes with me had not really been exposed to the real world. They found our account of our experience very useful. It was an experience. At the time I thought: “Is this making sense? Here are all of these young, bright minds working on the master's degree program, and I've been out of school since 1970.” Here it was, 1982. Was I going to be able to keep up?

I made my decision that for five days a week I would arrive in the Library at Johns Hopkins by 7:30 AM. I would take up residence in the Library, doing my studies, working on whatever was required to be done, only breaking to go to the various classes. Then, back to the Library, when the classes were over. I would not leave the Library until 9:00 PM. I did that from Monday through Friday.

Q: My goodness!

COKER: I would not take the work home. I devoted the weekends to my family. So I got through the course. I even enjoyed it. I made a lot of friends at the school. I still keep up with SAIS even today.

Then I got a chance to be posted to Uganda. This was in 1983. I went to Uganda in 1983.

Mission Director in Uganda - 1983

Q: What was the situation there?

COKER: Just before that point, let me go back for just a moment. I had chosen to go to Uganda, while I was studying at Johns Hopkins. Meanwhile, in the African Bureau of AID they had decided to restructure assignments to Uganda. AID had decided to put in two, additional Deputy Assistant Administrator positions at the geographic bureau level. They called me and asked if I would like to take one of these two, new positions as Deputy Assistant Administrator for a geographic area.

I saw that as less of a challenge than going back overseas again. Having been in Ghana and been bitten by the real world of development, I was anxious to go on to Uganda. Since I had been given the opportunity to choose, I chose Uganda and accepted assignment there in June, 1983. I arrived in Uganda at a time when they had theoretically lifted the curfew but, in fact, it was still being applied. At the same time, there was a considerable amount of gunfire being exchanged during the night. That was not easy to get used to. I found myself in an environment where I heard gunfire all during the night.

Q: Who was in the Ugandan Government at that time?

COKER: Milton Obote was the President of Uganda at the time. This was his second term in office. He also led the UNLA, the Ugandan National Liberation Army, a very undisciplined force. However, it provided him with the support that he needed. You may recall that President Obote came from the eastern part of Uganda. Most of his fighting men were Ocholis from the northern part of the country. There are the Gulu Ocholis and Kitkum Ocholis. The highest ranking general among the Ocholis was General Tito Okello, who was a Gulu Ocholi. The bulk of the officers and some of the fighting men came from the eastern part of Uganda.At the same time Yoweri Museveni and his National Resistance Army were fighting against Obote's government from the Lewelt Triangle, which is North

of Kampala. The reality was that the Ugandan Army, which was highly undisciplined and generally unpaid and unfed, was creating a lot of problems in the country for President Obote. This situation also served to disrupt the national economy, in many ways. This was a negative element working against attracting foreign investors into Uganda.

I arrived in Uganda in June, 1983. Ambassador Allen Davis, the new Ambassador, had arrived in Uganda a month before I did. John Bennett arrived as the new DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission] at about the same time. Craig Buck was the senior AID official at the time. Craig was there to provide me with advice and a transition as I became used to the country before his departure to go to another post. He had started a very dynamic program. We had ACDI (Agricultural Cooperative Development, International), a contract team consisting of six people, dealing with the food production support project. The ACDI was not only involved in working with the unions but with the Ministry of Cooperatives and Marketing. They were trying tredevelop the agriculture research farms, working to change the cooperative structure. They moved the cooperatives from central government control toward private enterprise.

We also had a project that involved working with Makerere University to rehabilitate its School of Agriculture and its two research farms. We had a very large participant program tied in to both of these rehabilitation projects. We also had a separate program which was developed in Washington to generate training for participants in the various priority sectors which the Ugandan Government had decided on. So we set out to develop a decent, development portfolio, initially dealing with the rehabilitation of private enterprise. The largest program called for providing about $32 million in loans.

Q: What were the loans used for?

COKER: The program was set up so that we would be able to use financial institutions, such as the local banks, to administer credit extended under those loans for which application had been made in the agribusiness and processing area. The loans also

went to businesses which had some relationship to the agricultural economy. We tried to get those businesses off the ground. They could apply to the local banks for loans for the rehabilitation of agriculture. The specific purpose of these loans was to bring in commodities and equipment to assist them in getting these projects under way.

We also had designed and obtained approval for a cooperative rehabilitation project geared toward piggybacking what the food production project had been doing. Through this project we hoped to reach the different components of the cooperative movement, specifically recognizing the roles that they could play in the overall economy of Uganda. This was an uphill battle. It was going to be taken on after the food production support project had ended. We had a separate contract under which we cooperated with the University of Minnesota and Ohio State University.

We had tied into this a program to fund the reorganization of productive enterprises as a means of getting small and medium sized enterprises rehabilitated. Some of this involved money which we had intended to use to help some of the Asian-owned businesses which had been medium to large in size. We wanted to get those businesses started again.

Q: Was the Ugandan Government receptive to that?

COKER: By that time some Asians, including Asian businessmen, had returned to Uganda, like the Madvani family. They had large tea estates. The Obote Government supported the reactivation of some of these industries.

Q: How did you find trying to implement these projects in the environment of civil unrest in Uganda at that time?

COKER: We found that we could work outside of those geographic areas in which military operations were going on. When I arrived in Uganda and for the first two years, military operations were confined to the Nawira Triangle. There were three districts in that area North of Kampala, in which the whole military campaign was taking place. There were

constant clashes between the UNLA [Uganda National Liberation Army] and the NRA [National Resistance Army]. We concentrated our efforts on the western, eastern, and extreme northern parts of the country. The last area of conflict was in the northwestern part of Uganda, in the Arua area, where Idi Amin [former dictator of Uganda] came from. We had a humanitarian assistance program going on there, involving the rehabilitation of agricultural production. We were working to encourage the refugees who had left Uganda and gone into eastern Zaire to come back home. That involved phasing out humanitarian assistance and beginning a program of development assistance in that area.

In the central and western part of Uganda there was little interruption to our programs. The only problems that we had were with a number of security checkpoints when we were traveling on the road to Masaka, on down to Kabale, and out to the Ruwenzori area. We had components of our operating projects in each one of those areas. They were basically being implemented in various parts of Uganda, so we didn't have any real problem in implementing them.

Likewise, in the eastern part of the country we had all of the projects related to agribusinesses. We had no problem working there, including rehabilitating the Serere Research Station, which was located in eastern Uganda. There were many cooperatives located in that area. On the whole, we found little disruption in the projects which we had.

We had a problem in getting to the small scale enterprises which we were trying to get started in the extreme northern part of Uganda, up around Gulu. However, we were able to travel directly from Kampala, the national capital, to Gulu on one of the northern routes, such as the Bombo Road. You could make this trip in two and one-half to three hours, at the most. That was the area where the insurrection or the fighting was taking place. We had to go to the extreme eastern part of the country, head toward the border with Kenya, and then go up North to Lira, and West to Gulu. This involved a kind of “horse shoe” route. This involved a trip of a day and a half going and a day and a half coming back. If you could have gone directly, you could have made the trip in three hours. I took

the short route from Kampala to Gulu a couple of times, when I thought that the situation had calmed down. The driver and I would get together and discuss the route to take. When we took the Bombo Road, we found, when we returned, that we would be called in by the Ugandan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and told that we had violated their wishes again and had put our lives in jeopardy by going up the Bombo Road. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs told us that the UNLA could have mistaken us for members of the NRA. The NRA could have mistaken us for being part of the UNLA.

We knew that the NRA never went after anyone other than the Ugandan military. They were considered to be very considerate of the native population and non-military targets. There had been no instances when the NRA attacked targets other than the Ugandan Army. So we were basically concerned about the UNLA. They were considered trigger happy people.

Q: Was there any evidence of the old projects which had existed in prior times, or were we starting everything from scratch, as it were?

COKER: There were no projects left over from prior times, except for projects at Makerere University, where we had been very instrumental in establishing the research farm for the School of Agriculture at Makerere University. On the research farm there were still houses that we had built for the professors who were assigned there. There were also classroom facilities for the students, who were assigned to the research farm for a year of academic training. Some of the equipment still on the farm went back to the 1970s and still earlier. In some of the buildings there were signs of what AID had done.

Q: What about work with livestock or the Toro Toro Girls' School. Do you remember seeing any buildings which went back to former times?

COKER: Shortly after I arrived in Uganda, I encountered one of my first headaches, the Toro Toro Girls' School. When I called at the Ministry of Finance and the ad hoc Minister of Finance, Kamuntu, one of the very first things that he brought to my attention was

the dilapidated condition of the Girls' School. He felt that we should be responsible for restoring it...

Q: We had originally built the school.

COKER: Yes, we originally built it. It was built near a school that had been built by the Russians. Everything was crumbling at the school that we were associated with, including the ceilings. The school that the Russians had built was basically still intact. It was being used very much as a model, so we were under a lot of pressure to rehabilitate the Girls' School.

The Minister of Finance also used the same occasion of my call on him to talk about the Institute for Public Administration [IPA], which the U.S. Government, through AID, had been responsible for building.

I found myself more sympathetic toward rehabilitating the IPA than I felt for the Girls' School. When I looked into the background of the Girls' School and how that project was funded, I discovered that the U.S. Government made the cash available to the Government of Uganda for building the Girls' School. The Government of Uganda was responsible for contracting for building that school and supervising its construction. I had little sympathy with the Ugandan Government over the condition of the Girls' School because the government, through its own contracting arrangements and its supervision, allowed the builder, whom the government selected, to build an inferior structure for the Girls' School. Now, when the Ugandan Government tried to claim that we were the party responsible for the condition of the school because we had made the money available for its construction, in my view that wasn't proper. Since we gave the Ugandan Government money and they took full responsibility to proceed with the construction of the school, why should its current condition be the responsibility of the U.S. Government, simply because we were the source of the funds? In other words, why should we be responsible for the maintenance and rehabilitation of the Girls' School?

I never found ways of assisting with any aspect of the rehabilitation of the Girls' School. We made funds available to the Ambassador, because of his desire to be involved...

Q: Was this money from the Self Help Fund?

COKER: Yes. On two occasions, while I was in Uganda, the Ambassador approved proposals from the Girls' School and allocated $25,000 each time for rehabilitation work at the school. So the U.S. Government was involved in some aspects of the rehabilitation of the Girls' School.

Q: What about the Institute of Public Administration?

COKER: When I researched the background of the construction of the Institute of Public Administration, I found that we had employed U.S. contractors, not only in the design of the school but also in its actual construction. When I looked into the various problems that had occurred at the school, one of the things that I looked into was the sewage backup that was occurring and therefore was making it difficult to use the kitchen and the toilet facilities. As workers dug up the sewage system, we discovered that the contractor, I'm fairly sure without the knowledge of the AID Mission, had used corrugated, and not cast iron, sewage pipes. Most new buildings settle to some extent. The corrugated pipes used in the sewage system did not work out well, and the sewage problem became acute.

Another area where, I think, major mistakes were made involved the number of electrical appliances we had put into the Girls' School. These appliances were all made for U.S. wattage. However, in Uganda everything was tied to European electrical standards. The electrical equipment which we had provided did not last very long. This included not only the kitchen facilities but also the wiring for the lights and the laundry facilities. To me that was a big mistake which related to our failure to supervise and monitor expenditures for the Institute of Public Administration.

In the case of the electrical lighting system, more than two-thirds of the wiring was unusable. The electric light bulbs in the fixtures had worn out. People who did not know what the problem was would tamper with the wiring, in an attempt to fix those circuits. They found that, once again, the lighting system was not suited to Ugandan voltage and wattage. The equipment installed met U.S. standards. There was also an inadequate supply of electric light bulbs in the inventory of equipment on hand. This was a serious problem.

So I felt that, with the students and the school being denied access to a number of classrooms, that was detrimental to the overall program. Another aspect of the problem which, I felt, was not our responsibility was that, in the main classroom building, the entire roof was leaking. I made it quite clear that, since the Institute of Public Administration (that is, the IPA) had an annual budget which was part of the Ugandan budget, the maintenance and repair of the roof was not our responsibility. Since a number of Ugandan roofing companies had done the basic construction of the roofs, there was no reason why the IPA should have allowed the roof to fall into such a state of disrepair. They could very easily have used some of the money received annually from the Ugandan Government to contract with a Ugandan roofer and have dealt with the leaks. The leaks in the roof, in turn, tended to ruin much of the electric lighting system.

I wrote up a proposal to do some things that we felt we should not be expected to do. I sent this proposal to AID Washington for approval. This proposal was initially approved. However, at the time it was approved the State Department issued a human rights report which cited gross, human rights violations in Uganda. When that human rights report was released, it had an immediate, negative effect on the proposed assistance to the IPA. Under the legislation covering foreign assistance, if there is evidence of gross human rights violations, the assistance going to that country had to be restricted to the most needy elements of the population. New funding could not be provided to any program in which the direct beneficiaries were not among the most needy. Since money going to the

IPA was not going to the most needy, money for doing anything for the Institute in fiscal year 1984 was ultimately denied. By fiscal year 1985 this money had already been shifted to another, required area, not in Uganda but outside Uganda.

Civil unrest and evacuation from Uganda - 1985

Also, by the time we got around to fiscal year 1985, the fighting taking place in Uganda between Museveni's NRA and Obote's UNLA became intense, to the point where we didn't know, day by day, what the situation was going to be. We didn't know whether we were going to be able to deliver any foreign assistance in Uganda. In April, 1985, the UNLA concluded that a campaign against the NRA in the Luwero Triangle, which had started at the very top of the northern portion of this triangle, had since spread out across all three of the districts in the triangle. The UNLA campaign was to spread out into a wedge to squeeze the NRA. An effort was being made to see whether the NRA could be wiped out. The NRA broke through the western line and made its way through the western flanks of UNLA to the Rwenzori Mountains. From these mountains and with the advantage of fighting from the high hills the NRA was able to do a great deal of damage to the UNLA. Many UNLA soldiers were killed.

Fighting became intense, to the point where the senior Acholi officer, General Tito Okello, approached President Obote to ask whether, as Ugandans, they ought to enter into negotiations with Museveni to find out whether they could bring the fighting to an end. That proposal prompted President Obote's government and the majority of officers in it, who happened to be from the Langui area of eastern Uganda, to brand Okello and the Acholi's as traitors. That resulted in fighting taking place in Kampala between the Acholi and the Langui components of the UNLA.

So there we were, in the months of May, June, and July, 1985, in the midst of fighting in Kampala. During that period we basically could not do anything. We heard bombs going off at night, with either the Langui-led or the Acholi-led military factions blowing up the

homes of the various officers on each side. There were pitched battles going on, day and night.

Q: Were you in danger?

COKER: At the time, whether we were in our houses or in our offices, we didn't feel that we were in danger. However, when we were moving through Kampala to the various offices, we felt some danger. Several of our vehicles were caught in cross fires and shot up, as the drivers did not know that they were in dangerous areas.

This fighting in Kampala continued until the Acholi side, under Okello, decided that President Obote's government was being unreasonable. They ordered a withdrawal of the Acholi faction of the Army to the North of Kampala (Gulu). However, prior to that, we had seen clear signs that the Acholi faction was being defeated. Traditionally, when they moved the bodies of dead soldiers who had been killed in action, they did so at night, when most people were asleep. However, there were so many dead that they were actually moving truckloads of bodies, covered with the limbs of trees, through the city, during the day. The stench of decomposing bodies of these dead soldiers was quite noticeable. When the people saw that this kind of thing was happening, it was quite upsetting to them. The Acholi troops were taking their dead comrades to a burial ground in the eastern and northern parts of Uganda.

Because the casualties among the UNLA soldiers were so substantial, General Okello had decided that he had to try to bring the fighting to an end. This was contrary to what President Obote and the Langui faction were prepared to accept. With that kind of fighting taking place within Kampala, General Okello decided to withdraw to the North (Gulu) during the third week of July, 1985.

Then the situation began to quiet down for a day or two. We had been hearing that the Acholi troops were being re-grouped to the North, from which position they would resume

their attacks on Kampala. However, we had no verifiable evidence that this had occurred or was about to happen.

So on Saturday morning during the last week of July, 1985, and since I was due to go on home leave on the following Wednesday, my staff was in the office, working with me. At about 10:00 AM that morning we heard very heavy gunfire. That was the beginning of the resumption of the Acholi attack on Kampala. Acholi troops had come down the Bombo Road from Gulu and were attacking Kampala and the Langui faction of the UNLA. By 12:30 PM Saturday July 27th, the Acholi troops had taken Kampala and had overthrown President Obote.

Then General Okello went on the radio to make an announcement of this. He called for a celebration of his victory at 1:30 PM in the central park. The Acholi faction of the UNLA began to loot stores and homes throughout Kampala. Meanwhile, my office staff and I were hunkered down in the AID offices. So we stayed in the AID offices from Saturday morning until Monday afternoon at 4:00 PM, before we could get out. In the interim we were communicating with the Embassy and also with USIS [United States Information Service] via radio. There were no Peace Corps volunteers there at the time.

Q: You weren't in the Embassy.

COKER: No, we had a separate AID office building on one side of Kampala, over in what was called the Nakasero area. The Embassy was downtown, in the rear of the British High Commission office. We were in communication with the Embassy. We were also told that the Embassy was in telephonic communication with the Department of State in Washington.

Between 1:30 and 2:00 PM on that Saturday the connection with Washington was broken. Somehow, the Embassy lost that connection. I think that a transformer was blown up,

stopping all of the electricity going to the Embassy. Then the State Department Operations Center was able to get our telephone number, and they called us up.

Q: Where was this Operations Center?

COKER: In Washington in the State Department. They kept a telephone line open to us from about 2:00 PM on Saturday until late in the afternoon of the following Monday. Subsequently, when I met someone who had worked in the Operations Center, dealing with the situation in Kampala, he mentioned, when he found out that I was in Kampala at the time, that they wondered whether we were aware of the size of the telephone bill that had been run up from keeping that line open. I was told that the bill was $52,000! I had not known that, but at least the State Department had communications with Kampala, by using the AID line. Three of us manned that line, 24 hours a day during this period, rotating between myself; Gary Mansavage, my deputy; and Floyd Spears, the Executive Officer of the AID Mission.

Q: Did you have any contact with the Embassy at all during this period?

COKER: We had radio contact with the Embassy. We used a two-way radio to communicate with the Embassy and with the USIS office. We notified the Operations Center of what we had been able to confirm regarding the condition of official Americans and anyone else associated with the Embassy, such as Third Country Nationals. We had Third Country Nationals from the U. K. [United Kingdom] working with us.

During this period from Saturday afternoon to Monday afternoon we had to confirm, twice a day, the whereabouts of our people. The State Department was contacting the next of kin of our people and giving them the condition of their loved ones in Uganda. The Operations Center used the telephone numbers of our next of kin, using information in the files in Washington. So we were able to keep next of kin in the U.S. informed regarding people on whom we could obtain information in Kampala.

On Monday a decision was reached by the American Embassy and the British High Commission that General Okello and his faction of the Army had taken control of the country. This faction was the element committing most of the human rights violations. We concluded that there probably would be no way by which we could work with them.

It was at that point that the Embassy approached the State Department in Washington about the need to have the AID component of the Mission greatly reduced in size, at least for the time being. As I said before, I was due to leave Kampala on home leave. We were reaching the close out point on the Food Production Support Project. We also had people working on the manpower development project, in cooperation with the Makerere University Research Station. In view of the situation, it was decided that virtually all of the AID personnel in Kampala should be evacuated to Nairobi, [Kenya], at the first opportunity, keeping only a skeleton crew at the AID office in Kampala.

So on the Monday after the seizure of power by General Okello and his faction, the British High Commissioner and the American Ambassador called on Okello and officially notified him that they would begin an orderly withdrawal of their personnel and families from Kampala, to begin on Wednesday morning, July 31, 1985. On Monday, July 29, when the situation began to quiet down, the armored vehicle that had been assigned to me was parked in the garage at my house. The Third Country National who had been assigned to me, Tony Cokane from the United Kingdom, had been in Uganda since 1979. He was a very adventurous type of fellow. When the fighting began in Uganda to overthrow Amin, he was touring in East Africa. He decided to go to Uganda, where he stayed. He was a very handy type of person. He was working at the AID Mission.

Tony Cokane volunteered to take my car, which had diplomatic license plates on it, and drive to my house to pick up the armored vehicle parked there in the garage. This vehicle could hold about 12 people at a time.

Q: It must have been a large vehicle to be able to carry 12 people.

COKER: Yes. It carried grenade launchers in front and rear. Under each one of the left and right front and rear fenders, it had two grenade launchers.

Q: This was the AID Mission Director's vehicle?

COKER: Yes.

Q: Incredible!

COKER: We called it the “Bat Mobile.”

Q: I never heard of that.

COKER: AID had outfitted this vehicle with armored protection at a cost of more than $120,000! When I arrived in Uganda in June, 1983, it was the first thing that I received. It was transported in a box and carried on a large truck bed. This vehicle was driven off the truck bed and put in my garage.

Q: Terrible!

COKER: When I saw it, I said to myself: “What in the world have I gotten myself into?” However, the “Bat Mobile” was ultimately very useful. Tony Cokane went to my house and picked up this vehicle from my garage and brought it back to the AID Mission office. Verdell, my wife, and I got into the vehicle. We went to check on some of the AID staff that was still in country.

Fortunately for us, most of our staff had no dependents. Since school was out, most of our dependents were on leave in the U.S. We only had one family there, with two dependent children. They happened to be the two, dependent daughters of my personal secretary, an American. One of the girls was going to school in Kampala and one was in school in

Kenya. The two girls were in Kampala at this time, waiting for their mother to go on leave. I also had a limited number of contract personnel with me.

I checked on these people and got back to the office. At that point we received the final orders from the Ambassador on the timing of the evacuation. So, starting on Wednesday morning, July 31, 1985, we began the evacuation process, with the British High Commission staff leaving in 15 vehicle convoys, starting at 7:00 AM. There was a very large number of British citizens in Uganda at the time. The Americans began to leave at 7:30 AM. We alternated, with a British convoy leaving on the hour and another convoy leaving on the half hour.

Q: So you wouldn't clog up the roads?

COKER: So we wouldn't clog up the roads. Instead of 15 vehicles at a time, I took out the whole AID contingent at once. I took 18 vehicles from the Embassy, USIS, and AID. The Ugandan military had cleared the road all the way to the Kenyan border for the British, American, and other convoys. They understood that the convoys were not to be tampered with in any way.

Q: So your effects were left behind.

COKER: Yes. We could only bring one, regular size suitcase. No animals. We left our pet dog there in the hands of Floyd Spears, the Executive Officer of the AID Mission.

In the lead vehicle in the American convoy we had two of the Political Officers from the Embassy. Without the knowledge of the UNLA troops which had cleared the road for us, the Political Officers had Uzi's [Israeli made sub machine guns] in bags, which provided us with at least limited protection. They were intended for use in case of an emergency of some kind.

When we got to the Kenyan border, we discovered that the UNLA commander at the border had not been given the word about the convoy's departure to Kenya.

Q: The Kenyan or the Ugandan commander?

COKER: The Ugandan. The Kenyans were aware of the plan to move us across the border into Kenya, because the Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, had been alerted by two-way radio that we were leaving Kampala for the Ugandan border with Kenya. So the Embassy in Kenya and the AID office in Nairobi had dispatched several vehicles to the Kenyan border to meet us, because they knew that we were packed in our vehicles like sardines. With the vehicles from Embassy Nairobi and the AID office in Kenya, we would be able to spread out once we got to the border.

I took three of the Ambassador's children out with me. The Ambassador's wife was already out of Uganda. I also had Embassy and USIS personnel with me. When we got to the border between Uganda and Kenya, because the Ugandan border guard was not informed that the withdrawal of our people had been ordered by the U.S. Government and authorized by General Okello, he decided not to allow us to take any of our vehicles across the border. However, he said that he knew enough about international conventions to know that he should not interfere with the rights of the people involved to go across the border into Kenya. So he allowed us to drive our vehicles, one by one, up to the border between Uganda and Kenya, allow the people to get out of the vehicle, with their possessions, and walk across the border. However, the vehicles had to go back and be parked in the compound behind the police station at Busia on the Ugandan side of the border.

So I kept one driver, including myself, for each of the 18 cars in our convoy. We parked our vehicles in the compound behind the police station at Busia. Since none of our vehicles was being allowed to cross the border, that meant that all of the vehicles from

Kampala that had started moving to the border with Kenya since 7:00 AM that morning were blocked at the border and parked on the grounds of the Uganda Police.

Q: Including the British High Commission vehicles, too?

COKER: Yes. So these vehicles were all in the police station compound. We formed a big, wagon train of cars in a circle. We used that as a means of providing them with protection. So there we were, overnight, with all of the dependents gone, except those who were staying with the cars. We realized that we would need to make arrangements for meals, and so forth. So we scurried around and collected as much as we could find in the way of Ugandan currency. We went into Busia and bought soft drinks and beer. We paid Ugandans to purchase and slaughter goats. The Ugandans were able to bring in drums and charcoal, lit fires, and started cooking the goats. So there we were, around the bonfires eating and drinking brew.

Q: And you didn't want to leave your cars?

COKER: No, we didn't want to leave the cars. If we had done this, we figured that we would never see them again. So we stayed there for a time.

When I discovered that we had this hangup at the Ugandan-Kenyan border, I also discovered that the Italian Embassy had a vehicle there with a two-way radio on it that could reach Kampala. I called Kampala and told them what our situation was. The Italians allowed me to talk to the American Ambassador in Kampala, using their radio. I said that it was important for the American Ambassador and the British High Commissioner, who had worked out the convoy arrangement with General Okello, to know that the Ugandan border commander had not received instructions, and none of the vehicles was being allowed to cross the border. We didn't get any reply that evening, but by 9:00 AM on the following day [August 1, 1985] the Ugandan border commander received the necessary authorization and allowed us to start taking our cars across the border with Kenya. During the previous night we had tried to keep the bonfires going, because Busia is at a pretty high altitude,

and it was pretty cold. In the car I had been driving myself, I got a large, American flag, draped myself in it like a blanket to stay warm. No one could mistake the flag for what it was.

Then, as I say, around 9:00 AM on August 1, 1985, we received permission to cross the border into Kenya. We discovered that one of the cars that we had in our 18-car convoy was a new, BMW which belonged to an American who was newly arrived in the Embassy in Kampala. She had brought this vehicle in from Paris, where she had been previously posted. It had not yet been properly registered in Uganda. I decided to talk to the Ugandan border commander. I told him that I would like to sign an “IOU” for this vehicle. They allowed me to do so, and I took the vehicle over to the Kenyan side of the border. When I got to the Kenyan side of the border, I told the Kenyan officials that I didn't have the proper registration papers for the vehicle. I said that I would like to sign an “IOU” for it. However, the Kenyan authorities would not accept an “IOU,” so they made me park the vehicle in the compound behind the Kenyan police station, with the understanding that if it wasn't cleared in 30 days' time, the Kenyan border police would sell it.

So, in any case, we made our way down to Nairobi. Meantime, the dependents who had crossed the border on July 31 had been taken to Nairobi by vehicles and one aircraft. The aircraft had been provided by the American Ambassador in Nairobi. It wasn't a very large aircraft, but it was big enough to take the two children of the American Ambassador to Uganda, plus my secretary and her two daughters. So they went to Nairobi. However, all of the others were driven in vehicles to Nairobi. On the next morning some of us who were still at the border decided that they were too tired to travel to Nairobi. They stopped at a nice hotel in Kakamega, [Kenya]. The rest of us continued on to Nairobi.

We got to Nairobi and started arranging for the processing of our people, with the assistance of the AID office and the American Embassy in Nairobi. Some of our people were to stay in Nairobi, some were to go on to Ethiopia to help out at the AID Mission in Ethiopia during the drought that was taking place. Those of us, like myself, who were

going on home leave, were processed to return to Washington. We stayed in Nairobi until we arranged to have everybody taken care of.

Q: So all of the AID Mission people and the contractors in Kampala had left Uganda?

COKER: Everyone had left except my deputy, Gary Mansavage, a bachelor. Floyd Spears was the Executive Officer and also a bachelor. They were the only two who stayed on in Kampala, along with the Foreign Service National staff. We also had Tony Cokane, a Third Country National from the U. K., who stayed in Kampala. Those were the three, non-Ugandans who stayed in the AID Mission. The rest of us were evacuated. Q: The Ambassador stayed at the Embassy in Kampala.

COKER: The Ambassador stayed in Kampala, along with a Political Officer; the Security Officer; and the USIS Director, who wanted to stay. They were the only ones who stayed from the Embassy staff. So those of us who were evacuated to Nairobi came back to Washington, after we had made the necessary arrangements in Kenya. I began my home leave, but weekly, and sometimes daily, I kept in touch with the situation in Uganda. Then a decision was made to start negotiations between the NRA; the NRM, the National Resistance Movement portion of the NRA; and Okello's group. They started negotiations in Kenya to try to bring some peace to Uganda. I recall that around December 17, 1985, they signed a peace agreement that was supposed to bring peace to Uganda.

By that time a new American Ambassador, Robert Houdek had gone out to Kampala to replace Ambassador Davis. The Department of State had also arranged for a detachment of six or seven Marines to be sent to Kampala to be posted at the Embassy. Prior to that, we didn't have any Marine guards at the Embassy.

So after the various Ugandan factions had signed the peace agreement, I was called over the Christmas holidays and told that I should get ready to go back to Uganda to prepare for reopening the AID program. So on January 11, 1986, my wife Verdell and I flew off to

Nairobi, where I rented an apartment for her. Then, on January 15, 1986, I flew back to Kampala to begin work on reopening the AID Mission.

When I arrived back in Kampala, I didn't think that anything was unusual. Things seemed normal. There were Ugandan military personnel everywhere in Kampala. They were at the airport, and there were several road blocks on the road from the airport to Kampala. In Kampala there were road blocks everywhere. I also noticed that there still was a lot of shooting going on.

On January 16, 1986, while I was at the AID office, I could hear artillery pieces going off in the distance. I called the Ambassador and asked him what was going on and whether he could hear the artillery pieces. He said: “Oh, yes, I hear them. That's the NRA army.” He said that, in view of the number of killings still going on in Uganda under the auspices of the Acholi faction of the UNLA, the Ugandan Government had allowed many of the former soldiers of Idi Amin, who were in the southern Sudan, to come back to Kampala. That group was also very dangerous. They were also involved in the commission of atrocities. Museveni had also decided that, in view of the killings that were going on, he didn't feel compelled to abide by the agreement which had been signed.

So, with all of the uproar going on in Kampala between the Langui faction of the UNLA and the Acholi faction, and the overthrow of President Obote, and while they were trying to get themselves organized in Kampala, Museveni came out of the Rwenzori area and started marching eastwards. As he marched eastwards, his army began to grow with the addition of a lot of the people who had been subjected to the abuses by the UNLA. Also, many of them were Tutsi people who had been driven out of either Burundi or Ruanda and had joined this army. In fact, many of them had been fighting at the side of Museveni ever since 1981.

They finally reached Masaka, which is only about 45 miles from Kampala. The best road that you could find in Uganda was the road between Masaka and Kampala. They started

to march on Kampala. The UNLA was trying to block them, and you could hear the artillery pieces going off. That went on from the Wednesday, when I arrived back in Kampala [January 15, 1986], through that weekend. Then, on the following Wednesday, January 22, 1986, the sound of the artillery was much louder. There were large contingents of NRA troops passing through Kampala, heading toward the West to fight the UNLA troops. This created a tremendous amount of disruption in Kampala.

I happened to be attending a meeting at the Central Bank at the time. I was negotiating with bank officials on conditions to get the Rehabilitation of Productive Enterprises Project under way. I came out of the bank at 12:00 Noon, and people were scurrying everywhere. Cars were going the wrong way up one-way streets. Everybody was just running for cover.

I returned to the AID office and decided that I would send everybody home. That was on January 22, 1986, at about 1:00 PM. We sent home those whom we were able to pass through the combat lines and to their homes. We decided that those people whom we couldn't send home that they would have to remain in the AID offices until we could get some kind of police escort. So I took some of the staff home with me to my residence. I left the others in the AID offices, with the doors locked. I was able to talk with the Embassy Political Officer and the Security Officer. They were able to get some support from the Ugandan police. So on the next morning, January 23, 1986, we went to the AID compound and were able to get everybody out and got them escorted to their homes. I told them to remain there until the situation settled down. I didn't know what was going to happen. I also got the people at my house escorted to their homes. That left me alone at my house, along with my household staff.

On the morning of January 24, 1986, a Friday, none of us went to the AID offices. Most of the American staff was living in the Kololo Hill area. Kololo Hill is one of the highest points in Kampala proper. The last of the gun emplacements for the UNLA were located there. That was their last, defensive position. By now the Ambassador was living and working out of the Embassy. along with a handful of staff. At about 6:20 AM on that day a large artillery

piece went off. I looked at my watch and wondered what this meant. The gun kept firing. Every minute a big gun went off.

I turned on the radio and listened, only to discover that the NRA had broken through the defense perimeter of Kampala itself. NRA soldiers were moving across the campus of Makerere University, coming into different sections of the city from the West. The artillery pieces we could hear were firing at what was called “point blank range,” by “bore holing” the target. That is, the gunners lowered the guns level, looked through the bore of the gun, and tried to pinpoint the target. Then they fired straight at the target and into the city.

That went on from Friday morning, January 24, 1986, at 6:20 AM, throughout the whole day. On Friday night and Saturday morning the guns were still firing. Meanwhile, we were all hunkered down to protect ourselves. We kept in touch by radio, not knowing what was going to happen. Some of the American houses were being hit by mortar fire. UNLA troops, many of whom had infiltrated Kampala before this battle began, had AK-47's [Soviet made automatic rifles] and mortars. As NRA troops broke through the outer perimeters, they infiltrated Kampala. They began fighting for each, high level position. Those fighting for Kololo Hill had set up their artillery pieces on the golf course, which is below the hill. They were firing mortar rounds. Admittedly, most of those mortar rounds were going over the target, although some of them were falling short of the target. Then the foundation of the home of the DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission] was hit, near the living room. The roof of the home of the Political Officer was hit. I told the Ambassador on the phone that some of us might be killed, if NRA forces continued to try to take Kololo Hill, using mortar weapons like this. Those mortar rounds were not hitting the target. The Embassy in Nairobi had good contacts with the NRM faction in Kenya, which was the political movement side of Museveni's Government. The Embassy explained to them what was happening and that there was a good possibility that, since a number of diplomats lived on Kololo Hill, some of them would be killed. Within an hour's time, the mortar firing on Kololo Hill stopped.

Q: It worked!

COKER: They stopped firing mortar rounds and began to use only small arms, such as AK-47 automatic rifles, in the fighting for that hill. That's what saved our people.

Q: But the UNLA forces were still on the hill.

COKER: The UNLA forces were still firing artillery pieces down the hill, they were still firing their Quad-50 machine guns, and they were firing shoulder-held rocket grenade launchers. They had been doing this for some time. There were the so-called NRA “child soldiers” and women fighting for Kololo Hill. We saw women passing by, loaded down with bandoliers of ammunition and AK-47 automatic rifles.

Let me back up a little and mention something that slipped my mind pertaining to this campaign for Kampala.July 198I mentioned the coup d'etat by Okello on Saturday, July 27, 1985. We were caught in the AID compound from that Saturday morning until 4:00 PM on Monday, July 29, 1985.

When I arrived in Kampala in 1983, one of the things that I did was to stock up on U.S. military C-rations. We not only had C-rations stocked in our houses but also in the AID Compound. We had the largest amount of C-rations allocated to the AID Compound, where most of the staff was located during most of the day. When I arrived in Kampala, the first thing mentioned in the orientation program at the Embassy was that the Security Officer asked me if I had a previous, military background. If you had a previous, military background, you had a choice of weapons that you could select. They had Uzi automatic rifles, 12 gauge shotguns, and .357 Magnum pistols. They had gas masks and bulletproof vests. So I chose a 12 gauge shotgun and a .357 Magnum, along with gas masks for both my wife Verdell and me, along with the bulletproof vests. Our daughter, Shyrl, was not with us. There were just my wife and I in Kampala.

Now return to January 198So when the fighting began in Kampala in 1986, after I had gone back to Uganda, following home leave, I still had those guns and that equipment in my possession. When the fighting began in our area on January 24, 1986, I had access to a two-way radio to keep in contact with the Embassy and other, official Americans. I had my own binoculars and other such items.

There was a hill to the West of Kololo Hill. I kept my binoculars trained on that hill, not knowing whether or not the NRA would get up on that hill and start shooting across at Kololo Hill. If there was fire coming from this other hill, in an attempt to silence the positions on Kololo Hill, we would be in a direct line of fire. Fortunately for us, this never happened. However, while I was observing the hill to the West of Kololo Hill, huge explosions were taking place in the valley from artillery or mortar rounds that the NRA was using to try to take Kololo Hill. They were passing over our heads, missing their target, and exploding over on the other side of the hill. As a round would go off below us, there would be a huge puff of smoke. I was able to take pictures of these huge puffs of smoke coming from the explosions.

In any case, going back to that Saturday, January 25, 1986, around 1:00 PM, NRA troops were approaching our position. They were having a lot of success in engaging UNLA forces on those hills. UNLA forces began to withdraw from those hills. All of a sudden, as I watched the situation through my binoculars, I saw elements of UNLA forces, in formation, coming off Kololo Hill. I have pictures of the UNLA troops withdrawing from the hill in two columns, moving on the back route heading East toward Jinja, to get out of the way of the approaching NRA forces.

The fighting continued until late Saturday afternoon and evening. The UNLA still had limited forces and some artillery pieces on Kololo Hill. When night fell, very heavy firing began, going on all around my house. The noise was deafening. I just didn't know what was going to happen. Some instinct told me that I had to get a recording of this firing. Among the equipment I had while I was going through all of this I had some nice, recorded

music playing, while I was doing everything else. I took one of my very nice tapes and switched it on to “Record.” I set the cassette tape recorder in the window. I recorded some of the firing going on around my compound. The firing continued until about 2:00 AM on Sunday, January 26, 1986, when, all of a sudden, there was a deep silence. I checked my watch. It was 2:00 AM all right. I still didn't know what was going on.

On the next morning, Sunday, January 26, 1986, as soon as daylight came, I climbed to the highest point I could reach in my compound. I saw a Quad .50 caliber machine-gun which the UNLA forces had set up in front of my house. The UNLA troops were using that machine-gun as part of their defensive system. They were occasionally firing down the street, first in one direction and then in the other.

Q: This was right in front of your house?

COKER: Yes. I hadn't been able to figure out what was making all of that noise, but that was what it was. There was this gun with four barrels, .50 caliber, mounted on a jeep. Next to my house was a vacant lot. On the other side of the vacant lot lived ex-Vice President Paul Malwanga. I didn't know that the last element of the UNLA forces, as they were retreating, took off their uniforms and threw them and their equipment into that vacant lot. As I looked out on the Sunday morning, NRA forces had arrived on the scene. At first, I didn't know that they belonged to the NRA, but I saw all of these people in the vacant lot, sorting through the uniforms which had been abandoned by the UNLA forces. They were looking through them, evidently trying to find their size and picking up all of the abandoned weapons.

I asked my servants to go over there and find out what was going on. They returned to my house and were able to tell me that the people in that vacant lot belonged to the NRA and that they had defeated the UNLA. About half an hour later we saw people pouring into the street, celebrating. This expression of joy went on all day long.

I had arrived in Uganda in June, 1983. From then until Sunday, January 26, 1986, I had not seen people able to walk in the streets at night, because of the presence of undisciplined UNLA soldiers. These soldiers invariably challenged the people. They would steal everything that the people had, because they were very poorly paid. However, from January 26 until the present, women, children, and anybody else could walk the streets at night in Kampala.

I have returned to Uganda several times since then, and the change is phenomenal. By the way, Kampala fell into the hands of the NRA on January 26, 1986, which happened to be my birthday! I thought that it was ironic that the NRA took over Kampala on that date.

I did not go out of my compound on that day. There appeared to be no damage to the compound. Not one vehicle had been disturbed or damaged, so we were fortunate. A few other AID houses had bullet holes through the roof. A record player had disappeared from one of the AID houses. We thought that that might have been an inside job. There had been no intrusion into our AID offices compound. We thought that we were very fortunate. The NRA forces appeared to be well disciplined. Museveni had led them since 1981.

Rebuilding the USAID program in Uganda - 1986Subsequently, after the fall of Kampala to the NRA forces, we had good relations with the Museveni Government. I remember the very first meeting which Ambassador Hodak and I had with Museveni on February 13, 1986. Museveni thanked the American Government for having very strongly supported him and for criticizing the Obote Government for its gross, human rights violations.

President Museveni immediately asked for the withdrawal of the British High Commissioner, who had publicly disputed the attitude of the American Embassy regarding the human rights violations by the Obote Government. The other diplomatic missions knew that we were right about the human rights violations, although they never openly opposed what we had been saying about the Obote Government.

At that meeting with Museveni he made clear what his philosophy was. He said: “Look, I want to run a democratic government. However, I have to restore the economy. We can only get the economy going if we are able to rehabilitate private enterprise. So I need credit.” That was the kind of magic that we were looking for. We had a $32 million project which we were ready to open up, but we hadn't been able to get President Obote to agree on the necessary conditions precedent to implementation. When Okello came into power, we just stopped negotiating. So we had this grant ready.

Q: On the books and ready to be implemented.

COKER: We were ready to go with the first, $18 million segment. So I explained to President Museveni what we had available. We had authorization to make loans to private enterprise through local banks to help to rehabilitate the private sector. He asked me why we hadn't gotten it implemented. I told him that we had tried to do so, but we could not reach agreement with the Obote Government. He said that he would assign one of his aides to work with us on the constraints of this project. In two weeks' time all of the conditions precedent to procurement were met and we were able to sign the project for the rehabilitation of private enterprises.

Q: Where did the money under this project go?

COKER: The money went to the different banks with which we had been able to work out agreements.

Q: Was this money in the form of cash?

COKER: Yes, in cash. There were cash transfers in U.S. dollars to the local banks, so that if the loan applications required a certain amount in U.S. dollars to purchase equipment or a certain amount in Ugandan shillings, the loan would be approved by the banks.

Q: Did we approve the loans under this project?

COKER: Yes. We approved the loans made under it, as well.

Q: So the basic funds were provided in the form of a grant, right?

COKER: Yes. The basic segment of this was in the form of an $18 million grant, which we brought in under the overall total of $32 million.

Q: Were the banks able to function, despite all of that chaos?

COKER: Yes. Surprisingly, there were branches of several of the international banks there in Kampala. There were branches of Barclay's Bank, the Standard Bank, and the Barooda Bank. So several of those banks were in Kampala, ready to participate in this program. They were ready to get started. The Uganda Commercial Bank, the largest of the Government banks, also chose to participate in this program.

Q: They were all participating?

COKER: Yes, they were all participating. So I stayed on in Kampala until June 30, 1986. Meanwhile, I had the opportunity to work with my Ugandan staff to prepare to start receiving back some of the American direct hire personnel who were assigned to the post. Many of my former staff who had been evacuated and had returned to Washington were transferred back to Kampala. Those who were evacuated to Ethiopia returned to Kampala. Eventually, I had all of my staff back and ready to go to work.

Also, the Manpower Development project, which had been conducted by people from the Universities of Iowa and Minnesota, also began to function again.

Q: What kind of manpower development did this involve?

COKER: This was provided for the rehabilitation of the Department of Agriculture and the Research Station at Makerere University. We also worked with the Ministry of Agriculture to improve its capacity to conduct planning and make policies. We also were able to

start up the Cooperative Development project. I worked with the Ministry of Cooperatives and Marketing. We had one person from ACDI, who was a carry over from the Food Production Support project. We had phased out all of those contractors, since they were coming to the end of their work. They had less than two months to go at the time the coup d'etat occurred. We were also able to arrange for the return of our dependents.

So I stayed in Kampala until June 30, 1986; then I was able to leave Kampala and transfer to the U.S. Mission to the UN in New York, which was my next assignment. Dick Podol came out of the AID Mission to Zaire to replace me in Uganda. We had started a private enterprise development program.

Museveni had let it be known that he wanted to have a democratic government in Uganda. He was convinced that this was the way to go, starting at the grass roots level. However, he did not want a multi-party political system. That was not a concern of mine, but it was a concern of the Ambassador's, who wanted to push for the establishment of political parties right away. Museveni said: “I can run a democratic government, all the way down to the grass roots level. At the same time I can have respect for the rule of law and the administration of justice. I can show that I am concerned about the general welfare of the people. Why should I be concerned about a multi-party political system at this point? We've just begun to take over. We have a long ways to go to get this country restored to some degree of stability. After we have some economic stability and we've gotten some of the wealth shared with the people, then will be the time to talk about a multi-party system.”

I noticed that subsequently, over the years, that that is what Museveni has continued to do. He has continued to advocate pretty much what he told us he would do. Some of the political Ambassadors we have had in Uganda since then have tended to disagree with Museveni. Most of them have seen that Museveni has combined the ingredients we look for in a democratic government. There are not yet any political parties, but that hasn't stopped a democratic process from operating from the grass roots level up to the top.

So that ended my three year assignment in Uganda. I am quite pleased to recall many of the things that took place there. Later, I had a chance to work at the UN in New York, where we, the USA, had a questionable relationship going.

Q: In the end, did you see any indication that the credits to get private enterprise going again were actually used for this purpose?

COKER: I saw the beginning of it. I saw the private banks institute the process by receiving the loans and then advertising their availability. The private banks provided some training on how to prepare the applications for these loans. I saw that some of the earlier loans were actually approved. Most of these loans were for the purchase of imported equipment. However, before any of the equipment arrived in Uganda, I had already left the country. I heard later that some difficulties developed in obtaining the equipment, but I never followed the process in detail. These loans not only used up the $18 million of the first segment of the $32 million loan, but they also depleted the $14 million from the second segment. Then additional money was added to the rehabilitation program. This program was a success. In the event, not everything went according to the way it was designed. However, this loan helped to rehabilitate the private sector. Many of the Ugandan business people were able to benefit from loans set aside for small and medium sized enterprises.

Q: Did some of these loans go to Indian businessmen?

COKER: Museveni was quite determined that he would find a way to bring the Indian population back into the country to take advantage of the economic growth that they could help to bring. He has been extremely fair in this particular area. Some of the Indians are despised by some of the black Ugandans. However, many of these Indians were born in Uganda and are Ugandan citizens. Many Indians have come back to Uganda and reclaimed their houses and office buildings. Since there had not been a concerted program of building houses in Uganda since the country became independent, there is

a tremendous housing shortage there. When I went back to Uganda in 1989, I found that many of the Ugandan Government officials that I had worked with continued to have trouble with housing. If they had garages, the garages were occupied by other family members or were being rented out to other people. The situation was quite pathetic. Uganda still does not have a significant housing construction program going on, even though many houses are being built. They just don't have a large enough housing construction program under way to relieve the shortage.

Q: Did you find any continuity in the bureaucracy and with the other people you worked with through all of these years of chaos, change, and so forth?

COKER: I have been able to maintain contact with many of the career civil servants. Some of them are in the Ministries of Economics, Finance, Agriculture, and Health.

Q: But in spite of the upheavals, they sort of stayed on in their jobs?

COKER: Yes, they stayed on. It appears that the first thing that Museveni did was to try to keep the civil service intact, to the extent that he could, while he was trying to make it more efficient. I found that many of the people with whom I had been in contact in the past were still there. I also found that some of them were forcibly retired. Some retired voluntarily and decided to go into private enterprise. I have been able to maintain decent, working relationships with the civil servants that I had known.

In fact, just to skip forward a bit, when I retired from AID in September, 1988, and set up my own consulting company, which I called Coker-Smith, Inc., the first contract that it received involved my going back to Uganda to work on the reorganization and reform of the civil service. So I went to Uganda and designed a project to assist the Ugandan Government in restructuring the civil service. After the project design was approved and funded, I was asked to stay on by Museveni as a commissioner to assist in the development of all of the written details for streamlining the government.

Q: We were talking about your work in Uganda and particularly with the Commission for the Reform of the Public Service. What was that about?

Served on the Uganda Commission for the Reform of the Public Service - 1986

COKER: President Museveni took over the Ugandan Government in 1986. He initially said that the government could not get the process of economic growth started in Uganda. He waited until 1988 to ask the UNDP [United Nations Development Program] for assistance in coming up with an organized approach to reforming the public service. In that connection the UNDP said that they were willing to pay for technical assistance to accomplish the necessary reforms.

I was approached by the UNDP...

Q: You had retired from AID by this time?

COKER: Yes. I retired in September, 1988, leaving the U.S. Mission to the UN. I left AID and set up the firm of Coker-Smith. The first request for assistance that we received came from the OPS [Office of Project Services] of the UNDP. This was in response to a request from the UNDP office in Uganda. They asked for someone who had extensive knowledge about Uganda, who had a public service background, and who could lead an effort to design a project to reorganize and restructure the Ugandan public service. The UNDP office in Uganda submitted my name. The Office of the President of Uganda and the UNDP office in New York approved the request and asked me to undertake that effort.

So I went out to Uganda in January, 1989, to get started. Initially, my task was to design the effort to restructure the Ugandan public service. My first question in undertaking this effort involved what the total process should cover. I took three months to design the effort, covering all of the different branches of the Ugandan Government, including the civil service, which they considered to be separate from the teachers' service, the judiciary, local government, the police force, the prison service, and the fire service. All of those

were considered to be a part of the overall public service and excluded anything that was parastatal. So I didn't have to be concerned about anything that waparastatal.

At the end of three months I had a design concept for a project which I had to present to the UNDP in Uganda and the Ugandan Government. When they approved the project design concept, it then had to be submitted to UNDP headquarters in New York for approval.

Q: What were the main features of your project design?

COKER: The main features involved looking at the public service as a whole. First, it involved determining the total complement of the public service. It turned out that everybody had different figures for the size of the public service, even down to the different components of it. I had to determine whether there were overlapping jurisdictions in terms of the different functions and, therefore, what duplications existed. What were the qualifications established for the different functions, how were they staffed, and what were the qualifications for the different staffs?

The idea was to see whether or not we could get an idea of the number of the existing public servants. That is, how many of them were legally listed in the records of the Public Service Commission and how many were qualified for the various positions. We had to do a census type count of the number of public servants and a diagnostic study of the functions of each of the government ministries, all the way down from the ministerial level to the lowest level within the ministry.

Then my task was to come up with a rational approach to how the public service should be structured. Then, tied to that structure, what the staff complement should be to perform these functions and which ministries and organs within them should be recommended for abolition? So those were some of the main features.

Q: It's very comprehensive. Roughly, how many employees did it cover?

COKER: At the time the government thought that there were about 320,000 public servants in a country with a population of 16 million. The government was the employer of first and last resort at the time. The government had 34 ministries that we had to deal with.

My recommendation was that we would have to establish a Public Service Review and Reorganization Commission to meet the responsibility of developing the detail design so that we could develop a bottom line recommendation as to what government ministries and offices ought to exist and to convince the President to approve this proposal. Then the implementation could start.

Q: It was a very political affair.

COKER: It was very much a political matter, because there were a lot of political appointments involved, especially at the minister and deputy minister level. There were also a lot of permanent employees, like the Permanent Secretaries of the different ministries. This was the first echelon within the bureaucracy. All of them were nervous about what was going to happen. We also had called for the first personnel evaluations ever conducted concerning every employee who belonged to the public service. This had never been done before. This was something that even the World Bank had said couldn't and shouldn't be done. In any case, that was another task that we had ahead of us.

So we felt that there had to be a Public Service Review and Reorganization Commission, authorized by the President, to give this effort the necessary authority to do its work and to get the cooperation of the various ministries to cooperate with it. We felt that this was necessary to develop the overall, detailed blueprint on how this ought to be done.

This project was approved by UNDP headquarters in New York about six weeks after they had received it. The UNDP then provided the initial funding of $1.4 million for the Public Service Review and Reorganization Commission. The Commission had 10 commissioners, including seven Ugandans, mostly from the private sector. Three of these

seven Ugandans had formerly been public servants but were now in the private sector. The other three commissioners were international. One of them was from Ghana and one from Nigeria, in addition to me (USA). We had a staff of 15 professional employees to support the work of the 10 commissioners for much of the high level work. We also had a lower support staff of secretaries, drivers, and others. The 15 professional employees and other support staff were all part of the official civil service of the Government of Uganda.

We worked for 18 months in all. We broke up the overall job into several tasks. We then had each one of the commissioners involved with a particular committee and responsible for so many tasks. In this way we allocated the total number of tasks that had to be accomplished. We had time frames for achieving these tasks. We laid out a time sequence of which activities had to occur first. We also had milestones that we had to achieve and on which we could report on a quarterly basis as to where we stood to both the UNDP in New York and to the Ugandan Government.We worked directly with all of the aid donor organizations and tried to bring them on board and ensure that they were informed of what we were doing. So we worked on this process.

Q: Who chaired the work?

COKER: The Chairman was Dr. Clark from Ghana. He had worked on the reform of the Public Service in Ghana. We asked the Ugandan Government to choose an outsider as the Chairperson of the Commission. The Ugandan Government indicated that it wanted to do this job in this way to minimize the impact on the Chairman of the various ethnic groups that we were working on. Dr. Clark, who had worked out of Green Hill in Ghana, the Ghana Institute of Management and Administration (GIMPA) and had gone off to London with his family. We were able to get him to leave London and come to Uganda to be the Chairman of the Commission. Dr. Clark arrived in Uganda in May, 1989. We also had Chief Jerome Udargi from Nigeria. He was the first of the Nigerian Permanent Secretaries prior to Nigerian independence. He had also worked on the reform of the public service in Nigeria and contributed to the reform of the public service in Gambia,

Kenya, and two other countries in Africa. So he was also a valuable resource on this job. The other commissioners, as I mentioned, were all Ugandans.

So we set out to develop the overall plan of work. We undertook detailed analyses of each one of the 34 ministries. We identified where there were duplications. Many of these ministries had been established and given responsibilities to meet certain political commitments.

We conducted a census of these ministries and departments and discovered that we had far fewer documented civil servants than the government said that it had for payroll purposes. We even used several means of testing the actual payroll and the numbers of people employed by the government. We took the Public Service Commission's rolls, like those of our Office of Personnel Management, which listed all of the registered public servants. So the Public Service Commission had that information, supposedly broken down by Department or Ministry. We used that list to compare with the payroll. We only authorized the payrolls to be compared for those individuals that we could document from the Public Service Commission's rolls. We tried this out with the Office of Teaching Services of the Ministry of Education. There were approximately 125 fewer people working for whom payroll checks had traditionally been prepared than those listed on the Ministry rolls. So we didn't prepare those 125 checks. We waited for two or three months but never received any complaints from individuals saying that they hadn't been paid.

Q: Did they exist?

COKER: We discovered that they didn't exist.

Q: Somebody was getting an extra check.

COKER: Exactly. We then ended up trying this process with every one of the government departments and ministries. We would do this by divisions within a given department or ministry, more or less as a random sample test. What this showed to us was that each

one of those ministries was sending in time sheets to pay people who did not exist. This was clearly being done intentionally. The pay for the public servants was so inadequate that people could not survive on it. So one way of getting enough money to enable them to survive was to pad the payrolls. We were never able to determine where the spread effect was and who actually received all of that money, though we had some fairly good ideas.

Clearly, we knew that each one of those ministries and departments within the ministries had padded payrolls. We did not know whether the money was being spread among the various employees as a way of giving them the compensation that they deserved. However, at least it told us why we had a problem and, therefore, we had to keep that in mind. Coming out of our overall effort was an attempt to find some way to pay some kind of living wage, as a means of trying to cut down on the level of corruption.

When we performed a test on an overall group, we even discovered that among the casual laborers of a given department, there were more than 30,000 “ghost workers” who did not exist. When you are talking about 320,000 civil servants, supposedly including the casual laborers, and we found in one check that we had 30,000 “ghosts,” this told us that we had a serious problem. In fact, we already knew that we had a serious problem from doing the tests on the payroll.

Now I'm going to skip ahead. During the analyses of the 34 ministries we discovered that there was some significant duplication of functions in many of the ministries. We were able to make a recommendation that the number of ministries should be reduced from 34 down to 21. We recommended that this total number could further be reduced if the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Economic Planning were combined. In some countries, as you know, these two ministries are combined. However, we said that this was something that the government should tackle later on. That is, it should go through the first phase of removing other than substantive ministries and reducing the total to 21.

After conducting the total census of the civil service and recommending that the civil service should be reduced to 21 ministries, as opposed to the previous total of 34, we also recommended that the public service should not exceed a total of 160,000 employees. Therefore, there had to be some way of downsizing the employment rolls to that total. So we devised a retrenchment program for the public service. The retrenchment program was tied to the fact that once we did the assessment of each employee and made sure that a performance evaluation was made on everybody under the supervision of the senior civil servants, then that supervisor had to do a rating of the raters. So, all up and down the line, performance evaluations were made on every public servant.

Q: How good were those?

COKER: We found, in some instances, that the people were not honest. We did not know that some supervisors were doing performance evaluations on members of their families. We didn't always know who was related to a supervisor. We were able to ascertain why the performances were considered suspect, because some people were providing useful information. They asked us whether we were really aware that John Doe was really the first cousin or a part of the extended family of So and So. Therefore, we had a basis for concluding that a given officer's evaluation was not necessarily as depicted in the performance evaluation. We also discovered that a large number of civil servants had already exceeded the mandatory retirement age.

There were many employees who had certain levels of disability and couldn't even perform the work that they were assigned to do. We found a large number of people left over from the former Idi Amin era who had been brought into the civil service during that period of time. In fact, they had never been tested and had never even filed proper papers for qualification in their jobs. So we had to go through a process of having them file their qualification to see whether any of them were able to do their jobs. We found that a large number of these people had not even completed secondary school. They were clearly not

qualified. Some of them held commissioner positions, some of them were rectors. They were occupying positions for which they truly were not qualified.

We filed a report, a “White Paper,” which was a review of the work done by the Government Reorganization and Review Commission. This report dealt with everything from a reduction in the number of ministries and why this should be done. We also prepared an implementation schedule on how these changes were to be made. We had a plan on how the excess number of employees should be declared redundant and how they should be removed from employment. We had a program that dealt with those who had reached or exceeded the mandatory retirement age. They would be retired, effective immediately. However, if they had good ideas on proposals for funding projects which were beneficial or productive for the country, they might be provided with funding to help them get started.

That particular approach was made available, not only to those that were scheduled to be retired but also to any public servants who were not scheduled to leave. If they volunteered to leave the public service and they had proposals which we thought would be good for funding and which could add to the productive sector, loan funds would be available to them.

Regarding civil servants in the support area, we had talked earlier on with the World Bank about starting a lot of civil projects. This would prevent these individuals from being simply dumped on the community. They would have employment on jobs involving civil works. We were disappointed with that aspect of it. Even after the World Bank had agreed that they would make these projects available, in the end, when implementation came around, these civil works jobs were not approved. So we had a situation where many of these laborers were simply dismissed and left to find their way in the community. That created a hardship.

We also proposed a schedule for achieving a living wage over a period of time for the remaining public servants. We categorized the remaining civil servants, who would be in this group of 160,000 still employed. The civil service would be lean and mean and would be composed of those who were performers. These were people who had demonstrated that they not only had the academic capacity but, in fact, were highly regarded by their peers as being excellent performers. If we had a lean civil service, this could begin to have a very positive effect on getting things changed in the economy to help stimulate economic growth. So we laid out a program for improving wages. We were able to convince some of the aid donors, especially the multilateral donors, to support a program under which they would be willing to abide by a pay scale attached to donor funded projects. This would provide a level of remuneration that would bring them as close as possible to a living wage and which would enable them to survive.

We also recommended a program of stating in monetary terms the large number of fringe benefits which the civil service had inherited from the colonial past and continued to benefit from. They wanted to say that if the British civil servants were entitled to these benefits, Ugandans should also benefit from them, since they were now in the civil service. These benefits included housing, education, transportation, and other facilities. It was simply not feasible to do this. So we said that these benefits were part of the reason why civil servants were not receiving a net, disposable wage which would enable them to live off their earnings. However, we said that we had to find ways of paying them a respectable wage.

One of the problems that we encountered with this was that civil servants not attached to donor funded projects became demoralized. A relatively small percentage of civil servants were attached to donor funded projects. They received close to a living wage. However, whether a worker was attached to a donor funded project or not, he or she was still shopping at the same stores. Those workers attached to donor funded projects had more money to buy the things that they needed.

Q: Were the aid donors topping up the wages paid to workers attached to donor funded projects?

COKER: They were topping up or subsidizing the wages paid to these workers. So we had a problem with some donors who were topping up wages, especially the UN, and some of the Nordic countries. However, the U.S., the Canadians, the U. K., and many of the countries of the European Union did not top up the wages of those working on donor funded projects. What they did was to have periodic reviews of the compensation being paid to civil servants attached to donor funded projects. In addition, they made in kind payments and also looked for opportunities to send people on field assignments. These people were entitled to a per diem allowance while on travel status.

Q: Then they were topping up through the back door.

COKER: That's right. They also arranged for training assignments, which became very common.

Q: You mean workshops.

COKER: Workshops in every category that you could think of. The Ugandan Government and the aid donors agreed in 1992 that over a period of four, consecutive years, that is, during 1992, 1993, 1994, and 1995, the donors, as governments, put the restructuring into effect. In this way they exercised greater control over expenditures, as well as generating a larger amount of revenue. As revenues increased and expenditures went down, they would be able to absorb more of the costs and would be able to pay more to public servants. Therefore, we arranged for the government, on an annual basis during four, consecutive years, to try to adjust its budget so that its excess revenue could account for 25% of the 100% that we had anticipated would be required.

Q: I see. So the aid donor countries were providing budget support for payrolls?

COKER: Some of them were providing certain budget support for payrolls, but most of the donor countries did not. Where they didn't provide budget support, they used the back door means we have already described. Then other countries...

Q: This was on a piecemeal basis and not as a part of a general fund.

COKER: Right. It was not in the general fund. The aid donor countries backed away from the idea of contributing to a general fund. The Ugandan Government wanted a general fund, but clearly not a single donor country would agree to that.

Q: What did you think about it?

COKER: I thought that it was a bad idea because I didn't think that it would be managed properly. I liked the idea of being able to compensate all of the public service in a better way because I found myself engaged in open discussions with political figures and cabinet ministers, debating with them over the fact that in the newspapers and on the radio they were openly calling the civil servants corrupt and lazy, giving them the kinds of names that were demoralizing the public servants. However, at the same time, these political leaders were being given such large allowances, not pay but allowances, that they, in turn, were not hurting at all. Therefore, they had the equivalent of a living wage. For example, every time a Member of Parliament sat in the Chamber, he received a sizable sitting allowance on a daily basis. He got money for housing. If he was from up country, he got money to rent decent housing in Kampala. He had access to a car and a driver. He had all of the money required to support the car. So they weren't hurting.

The same thing was true of the cabinet ministers and the deputy ministers. They had equivalent kinds of pay packages. Yet, at the same time, they were demoralized. They referred to the rest of the civil servants as corrupt and lazy. What we knew was that when we measured the net income of a civil servant, against the cost of living, they were getting something less than a living wage.

So who wouldn't be corrupt? If they had families to feed and were coming to work on a daily basis, even if they only worked 10 minutes or one hour, they were probably not being properly compensated even for that. Many of the public servants would come to their government offices to use the telephone to try to generate income to support their families. Some of them would steal a ream of paper, which they could then sell for about 6,000 shillings to help to pay the school fees of their children. Everything seemed to be disappearing. Things appeared to disappear because that was the cost of survival. Here we were going around, demoralizing the civil servants by doing what we were doing. In fact, they were a bunch of fat cats supervising the civil servants. We had some lively TV debates on these issues.

Meanwhile, we were working to try to establish a system of decent wages. I'm proud to say that during each of the three, consecutive years, 1993, 1994, 1995, and at the beginning of 1996, the Government of Uganda made substantive pay increases to the civil servants. The government also monetized the housing and transportation allowances provided to civil servants, that is, calculated them in monetary terms. These were then added to the total compensation package.

Q: You mean that they were given money instead of services in kind?

COKER: That's correct. For those who were fortunate enough to live in government housing, and there were only a few of them, a program was established to allow them to purchase the government housing that they occupied, at a nominal price. Or, they could choose to leave government housing, and someone else could bid on it. Since there had not been a concerted, government housing construction program in Uganda for many decades, and even now they don't have such a program, it was difficult for people to have access to quality housing. However, by at least monetizing housing allowances, and giving the people the money equivalent of the housing, the private sector began to start filling the

housing shortage. The private sector started building programs to make housing of some kind available to the people.

Some people were able to save money through the various travel programs that they were undertaking. After acquiring a plot of land, each time they returned home from a trip abroad, they would take some of the money that they brought back in the form of savings from per diem and other allowances and would buy additional building materials for their homes until they had it built. Quite a few people built their homes that way.

Q: Did they raise the issue of a living wage? What was achieved in the way of raising wages to a living level?

COKER: By the end of 1995 the wages paid by the Ugandan Government to public servants were close to 75% of what was categorized as a living wage.

The Ugandan Government wanted to renege on letting 1996 be the final year for contributions by donor countries under this particular program. There were some difficulties at the Paris Club meeting in 1995. The Ugandan Government persuaded the aid donors to agree that they would call in a mediating group to try to mediate the cessation of this program, under which the aid donors contributed money to help to make up the difference between what the government had achieved toward paying a living wage and the wages it was actually paying.

This gave me an opportunity. I was contacted by the UNDP, with the approval of the Ugandan Government, and asked to head up a separate team to come in and review the overall program in this regard. We started from the point in 1992 where the Ugandan Government and the aid donors had agreed to raise wages. We considered what the government had achieved in each of the ensuing years up to 1996. Then we assessed whether the government's operating budget was adequate, up to 1996, to meet the objective of a living wage, as well as whether the budget projection for the 1996-1997

year was going to provide sufficient funding for the Ugandan Government to close the remaining gap.

What we discovered was that the Ugandan Government, through the changes it had made in financial management and in decentralized tax collections, exercising very firm controls on expenditures, had, in fact, generated enough revenue to put itself in a position where it did not have to compete in borrowing money. In fact, the government had a savings account. It had a surplus. It had also generated more than six months' income in foreign exchange earnings to cover Ugandan imports. As far as the Ugandan budget was concerned, the government had an operating profit. When you looked at the government's operating budget, revenue not only exceeded expenditure projections but it had become possible for the government to pay 100% of the living wage for public servants, without the aid donors contributing any more money for this purpose. Therefore, our recommendation was that there was no longer any need for the continued existence of this incentive program after July 1, 1996. We persuaded the aid donors and the Ugandan Government to agree on this. The government said: “Well, you can't blame us for trying. If we could get away with it, and the aid donors did not object, why not have the aid donors pay into this incentive program for another year and add to our surplus?”

In any case, the aid donors came out ahead on this incentive program. In July, 1996, Uganda became the second developing country able to pay its public servants on a par with the private sector.

Q: What was the first country?

COKER: Singapore. So Singapore and then Uganda had achieved parity between the pay of public servants and that of people employed in the private sector. They saw a reversal in the flow of Ugandans who had been leaving the country and going to work for regional organizations. Ugandans were now coming back to Uganda after working for regional organizations abroad. There was a tremendous inflow of highly qualified Ugandans able

to return home and accept positions in private sector work, taking over many of the jobs performed by international experts from outside of Uganda.That situation created some problems among the donors because, as you know, many of the donor programs called for a certain number of experts coming from their own countries. To some extent this has created a requirement for the Ugandan Government to ask donors to look very seriously at the numbers of international experts that they wanted to assign to each of the projects which they were supporting in Uganda. There was now a significant number of well-trained Ugandans available.

Q: You think that the donors, despite that accomplishment, were still doing some topping up of wages to protect certain people or keep them employed in Uganda?

COKER: I couldn't prove that that was the case. However, I surmise that there were probably still some such cases. You could not get donors to confess that, in fact, they were continuing to do this. Since we knew that most of the bilateral aid donors didn't do this, it was thus the UN which was doing it. Basically, the Ugandan Government felt that it could hold the UN's feet to the fire by having our team come in to study the problem. We were a group of people from the bilateral aid donors, and not from the multilateral aid donors. What we saw was an opportunity for the Ugandan Government to take advantage of UN agencies which had been topping up wages. The UN was very pleased at this development.

Q: Did the World Bank also...

COKER: The World Bank, the UNDP, and every one of the UN agencies were on board in this connection. The UN General Assembly had passed a resolution supporting this change. The UNDP was also on board and said that it was opposed to further topping up of salaries of international civil servants.

This set a precedent. I'm fairly certain that many of the other countries will follow suit and try to have the same thing done. However, that was considered to be a fairly successful

reform. The World Bank considers the reform of the public service in Uganda as THE model. Originally, the World Bank considered that Ghana was THE model. That was a reform which was completed.

Q: Were your recommendations carried out?

COKER: All of the recommendations were carried out, including the merger of the Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning. This was done over a period of two years. Then the Ugandan Government decided to separate the two ministries again, for essentially political reasons. Now there is a Ministry of Economic Planning and a Ministry of Finance. These are separate ministries. I see creeping back into the cabinet some Ministers Without Portfolio. So they evidently didn't get away from the habit of appointing more cabinet ministers. To fulfill certain, political commitments, they appointed a number of ministers without portfolio. That practice entitled these ministers to have a certain number of people on their staffs. At the same time, all of this additional expenses for the national budget. I find that the Ugandans have gone a long ways to stay the course on these reforms, which is a good development to see. Anyway, this was a good experience.

Q: It was very impressive.

COKER: I thoroughly enjoyed working on this reform process. I was glad to see that the World Bank wanted to use what we did in Uganda as a model at the country level. They openly said that they wanted to use us as an example. We had been told repeatedly that, when it came down to the company which I was running at the time, we were too small. The World Bank would prefer to have very large companies to undertake these kinds of reforms.

In July, 1997, I ran into this attitude in Kenya. A World Bank officer indicated that the bank was pressuring the Kenyan Government to reinstate the reform of the public service. However, he said: “Irv, you should be aware of the fact that we are recommending that only a very large firm should be called in to handle this.” That was a disappointment. We

had found that large firms charged very substantial fees. As far as my firm was concerned, we had been able to assemble a good cadre of experts to work on a matter of this kind.

We now have a group of experts who had this experience in Uganda. We could put them together far more cheaply than the big firms could do and we could accomplish the same thing. We might be even better. We had a successful model and we could do the same thing elsewhere. However, the World Bank looked at this matter quite differently.

Q: That was an excellent discussion. Is there anything else in Uganda which you would like to mention?

COKER: I think that basically, by and large, Uganda has a form of democracy which creates some difficulties for the Department of State. It creates some difficulties for our legislators because of the fact that Uganda does not have an open, multi-party political system. The emphasis is all on the theme of unity. What I found was that the Ugandans practice democracy all the way down to the grass roots level, under the National Resistance Movement. The elections to choose their representatives are also held from the grass roots level on up. They also have true respect for human rights and they exercise the rule of law.

So my philosophy has been that for the time being, while Uganda is still trying to get on its feet, economically, so that it can share the wealth with the entire population, we should not be pushing for something which is openly multiparty. That is, as long as the present system is, in fact, supported by basic documents. Uganda is a practicing democracy.

Q: Do the voters have a choice?

COKER: They have a choice.

Q: Do they have a variety of candidates and all of that?

COKER: They have all of the elements of a democratic system. Participating in it are former members of the UPC [Uganda People's Congress], which was the party of President Obote, and of the DP [Democratic Party], which was the opposition. They are active in political life, and individual people can see that they still use the labels of the UPC and of the DP. So there is a Parliament that is elected by the people from the base up. Many of the members of that Parliament are former members of the political parties that existed. They are running under that movement. We see that Uganda is getting wealthier and wealthier.

Q: There are still some rebel movements.

COKER: There still are some rebel movements. You still have former Obote supporters; you still have some former supporters of Idi Amin; you still have former supporters of Okello still active. Some of them operate from southern Sudan into the northern areas of Uganda. Some of these people operate from eastern Zaire or the Congo into the western part of Uganda. Basically, these rebel movements have not been very effective. However, at the same time they are a nuisance. They require the Ugandan Government to spend some of its valuable resources that could be used for other purposes in the country to put down these rebel movements.

I found an honest attempt on the part of the Museveni government to forgive these rebels and ask them to come back and assimilate into the community. I saw this process happen with Tito Okello and with several of the people who were diplomats under the two Obote governments. They stayed away initially. Then they began to put out feelers and finally came back into the Uganda. Some of them are now members of the Ugandan Parliament. I knew quite a few of them.

When I go back to Uganda now, I can see Parliament functioning. Now there is freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press. When I read the accounts of what took place on the previous day in Parliament and I see the names of individuals

whom I know and who were previously members of Parliament, as well as the kinds of things that they were talking about in Parliament, I can conclude that they are truly challenging the Ugandan Government. They challenge various aspects of different laws as to whether they are best for the country, or whether they are more parochial in intention. It is all very active and very lively.

I find that there are some ethnic problems in Uganda, which I disliked. Development is not being allocated across the country in anything like a truly equitable manner. It appears that in the eastern part of Uganda the government may have allowed the Karamojong people, who happen to think that all of the cattle in the world belong to them, to raid the herds of cattle belonging to other people. They are unchallenged. Now the Karamojongs carry AK-47 automatic rifles. Previously, they would raid cattle herds and just take the cattle. Now they shoot up houses, they kill people, they burn down property. I don't see that there is a concerted effort by the government to stop this kind of activity, when it has the capacity to do so. The government allows defense forces to be formed by the communities concerned. It would be far better to train these defense forces so that these communities can protect themselves against raids by the Karamojong's.

Sometimes, it has been discovered that some of the Karamojong raiders have been infiltrated by members of rebel groups who have become renegades and who are only interested in looting the property of other people for their own gain. I see that as a problem.

Unfortunately, the people in the northern area of Uganda have not been able to achieve much development because of the frequent incursions by raiders from southern Sudan. I think that that is hurting the kind of development that could be taking place in the North.

Q: What about the overall economic situation?

COKER: The overall economic situation is extremely good. There is very little inflation. When President Museveni came in, there was double digit inflation, in the 60-70% range,

on an annual basis. That went to triple digit inflation, exceeding almost 200%. For the last four years inflation has been held down to less than 5%. The Ugandan currency has not been depreciating but has, in fact, been appreciating against all other currencies. It has been stable against the U.S. dollar, as well as against the British pound. At the same time virtually all of the other African currencies have been going down in value.

There are many, private sector business firms being established, foreign investments are coming in, and Ugandan businesses have returned and are investing in the country. There is a fairly friendly investment climate. There are still some problems with the investment code, even though Uganda has established a one stop shop for investors. This has not prevented some of the long established ministries from exercising control over approval of investments. This pertains in particular to new firms and investments starting up. New firms still have to go through some hoops and jump hurdles. That slows down the process for getting new businesses started, to some extent, and it creates some frustration. However, I understand that the Ugandan Government is working on that. I find this another instance where the bureaucracy is refusing to accept backing away and being involved in the process. It is creating some slow downs in this connection.

Q: Did you have any involvement in addressing the HIV/AIDS problem?

COKER: We didn't but we found that AID, the World Bank, and the European Union were all very effective with their programs, because of the fact that President Museveni was quite open in feeling that education, along with treatment, was extremely important. He allowed the launching of the very first, major AIDS education program in Uganda. That program has been extremely helpful in reducing the rate of spread of HIV there. Entire districts have been wiped out by AIDS. The only people you find in some districts are elderly people and infants. However, by and large, I am pleased with what I have seen in Uganda.

On another subject, I don't know just what the motive of the Ugandan Government is in the conflict between the Tutsis and the Hutus. President Museveni himself is a Tutsi. I find it difficult to think that there is not an overall grand plan behind what the Tutsis are doing, of which he is an intimate part. I think that the U.S. has basically turned its eyes away, in some respects, from the role that Museveni is possibly playing with the Rwandans in that sub-region of Africa and the destabilizing of the former Zaire. I feel that Museveni must have played a role in this affair. I think that the U.S. and South Africa have played a part in making sure that material was made available to rebel forces in southern Sudan to fight the civil war there. Part of this material may have been used there and part of it in eastern Zaire. I don't know the details but I feel that there is some cooperation going on between the Ugandan Government and the surrounding governments, where there are ethnic differences between the Hutus and the Tutsis.

Assignment with U.S. Mission to the UN - 1986

Q: Let's go back a bit. Before you retired from AID, your last assignment was at the UN. Is that right? What was that job about?

COKER: I was assigned to the U.S. Mission to the UN and served there from July 1986, to September 1988. I was the senior AID Coordination Officer attached to the U.S. Mission to the UN. At that time I served under Ambassador Vernon Walters. This job basically involved representing the U.S. Government before the various committees dealing with development issues. Gordon MacArthur served as my deputy. Between the two of us we spread ourselves out to deal with the various meetings held in the offices of the UN development agencies, such as the UNDP [United Nations Development Program], UNICEF [United Nations Children's Emergency Fund], and UNFAO [UN Food and Agricultural Organization]. We also “covered” meetings being held in Geneva, Vienna, and Rome by different UN development agencies. So we were two people, running all over the place.

Various UN committees were meeting, especially the Second Committee, where most of the meetings on development issues were held.

Q: Is the Second Committee part of the Economic and Social Council [ECOSOC] of the UN?

COKER: It comes under ECOSOC. However, the Second Committee always dealt with development issues and humanitarian assistance. At times there were meetings of two or three sub-committees held simultaneously. Gordon and I would find ourselves unable to cover everything, especially when more than two meetings were held simultaneously on a given day. So other officers at the U.S. Mission to the UN would be assigned to us by the head of the ECOSOC section of the U.S. Mission.

We looked for any kinds of contentious issues and terminology being introduced in various resolutions that might not be in accordance with the policies which the U.S. was advocating with regard to development and humanitarian assistance.

Q: What were some of the major issues in this connection? Obviously, there must have been hundreds of them, but what were some of the more significant matters that you had to wrestle with?

COKER: One issue which comes to mind was whether or not capital punishment should be carried out in the host country. That meant, in the U.S. That issue was very popular at the time. There was a large number of representatives of governments receiving aid from the U.S. who were sitting on these various committees. Of course, they wanted to be in a position where they would be in control of managing any kind of development assistance funds coming into their countries. We had to find some kind of compromise because the countries in the G77 [Group of 77 developing countries] and the Non-Aligned Movement [NAM] exceeded the number of countries belonging to the OECD [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development], which were the countries providing most of

the development assistance. We found ourselves constantly in a position where we might be outvoted if we allowed the language in resolutions to be contrary to what we wanted. So we were involved in maneuvering to try to get the language of these resolutions changed to meet us more than half way and so avoid getting into a bind. That is, having resolutions passed which we, as a large aid donor country, would be embarrassed if we tried to fulfill requirements approved by the UN. We did not want the UN to control what we did on a bilateral basis with various countries.

Q: Were there other issues?

COKER: There were issues pertaining to humanitarian assistance. For example, whether or not we should grant humanitarian assistance to a country that may have voted in favor of a resolution which we found detrimental to our interests or which we vehemently opposed. One example was a resolution calling on us to lift the embargo on trade with Cuba. I recall one occasion when one such resolution was up for UN consideration. We faced some embarrassing situations in this regard. If a country that voted in favor of lifting the embargo on trade with Cuba and which may have experienced a natural disaster afterward and which then approached the UN for some assistance, we would then be required as delegates to call for a vote. We would have to cast a negative vote on assistance going to that country.

Q: Even disaster assistance?

COKER: Exactly. I found that quite difficult to do. I have to admit...

Q: I thought that we had an exemption for humanitarian assistance.

COKER: We had an exemption on humanitarian assistance in the context of AID assistance. However, when it came to UN assistance and how it was administered in New York, we would have to oppose such assistance and call for a vote in the General Assembly on this issue.

Q: So there was a difference between how we handled policies in the UN and how we handled AID assistance.

COKER: Yes, there was a different policy. When I arrived in the U.S. Mission to the UN, knowing what I did about our policies in USAID, I persuaded Ambassador Walters that we should follow the same policy as in AID. That policy was that we would provide assistance to a nation experiencing a natural disaster, irrespective of its political ideology. He agreed to this. However, we drew the wrath of the Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs at the time.

Q: Who was that?

COKER: At the time Alan Keyes was the Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs. He discovered that we were not following the instructions of the Department of State. He would come to the UN on the day of the scheduled vote. He would take the chair as the senior U.S. representative. He would call for a vote, he would cast a dissenting vote, and he would then leave. When it came time for explanations, we then had to give the explanation as to why we cast the negative vote. That was an experience that I thoroughly disliked.

Q: Was this a result of Keyes' personal view or the position of the Department of State generally, determined higher up in the administration?

COKER: My honest opinion was that it was a personal view of Alan Keyes. The reason why I say that is that on every one of that kind of issue IO was supposed to clear the instructions with USAID in Washington. When I would call back to the PPC [Program Office] in AID in Washington, which was the office backstopping me, I would discover that there had not been any discussion with AID on this kind of issue.

I again started to resist Department of State instructions. I would not call for a vote on such a resolution. Every time we did something outside of the UN General Assembly, especially

in the Second Committee, I would deliberately not follow Keyes' instructions. I said that I would take full responsibility but that I would not follow his line. I would say that if we, in practice, have a policy which states that we will provide humanitarian assistance to the people of a country, it is foolish for us to vote in the opposite way on a given resolution, knowing very well that we are going to do something to the contrary on the ground.

Q: Was this issue ever brought to the attention of more senior officers in the Department of State?

COKER: I don't recall that this issue was brought to the attention of the Administrator of AID. I felt that, once I took the matter to PPC [AID Program Office], it would be their responsibility to take it to the Administrator of AID. I know that Ambassador Walters took this view on some of the guidelines handed down to us by Alan Keyes, the Assistant Secretary of International Organization Affairs. Ambassador Walters took this matter to the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State agreed with Ambassador Walters that in many instances we were being directed to undertake certain action in New York which, we felt, were coming, in fact, from the Heritage Foundation, through the Department of State, to us. The reason why we thought that this was the case was that we would have certain discussions going on in New York, pertaining to matters related to the UN. We would get phone calls after we had communicated with the State Department in Washington, informing Department officers at the initial stage about matters that were coming up. The next thing that happened was that we would get a phone call from the Heritage Foundation in New York, relating to what we had just discussed with the State Department in Washington. We took this matter to Ambassador Walters and said: “Something is wrong here. How is it that every time that we have a discussion with IO in the Department on matters relating to some aspect of the UN, on which we wanted to have a dialogue with the Department to come to some kind of mutual understanding and to avoid having contrary views, we get a call from the Heritage Foundation?” I said that this would indicate that someone within IO was in direct communication with the Heritage Foundation,

specifically on issues which were coming up in the UN. Then we would get a phone call from the Heritage Foundation.

Ambassador Walters took this matter to the Secretary of State. The Secretary of State dismissed the Assistant Secretary of State for IO Affairs and his deputy. The Secretary directed that anyone within IO that had formerly worked with the Heritage Foundation must be removed and removed immediately.

Q: Who was the Secretary of State at the time?

COKER: That was in 1986, during the Reagan administration, so the Secretary of State would have been George Schultz.

Q: That's right.

COKER: I'm fairly sure that the Secretary was George Schultz. He ordered the removal of Alan Keyes as Assistant Secretary for IO Affairs. We then had a major change in the way we dealt with these matters.

Q: Who took over as Assistant Secretary for IO Affairs then?

COKER: I'm not sure who took over from Alan Keyes. I remember that at some point we had John Bolton, whom I knew from our USAID days. I was wondering how he was going to perform as the Assistant Secretary for IO Affairs. However, at least he wasn't as radical as Alan Keyes was, from the standpoint of instructions that we received.

Q: Amazing!

COKER: We did not receive the kind of instructions that we had previously had from Alan Keyes.

Q: Did you have an impact on the U.S. position on other matters that weren't quite so political but which were more clearly developmental in that context?

COKER: I think that I recall that one area on which we had an impact related to coordination. The Department of State wanted to have better coordination among the UN agencies at the field level. This matter wasn't going to impact directly on USAID and the government of the United States, as far as its missions in the field were concerned. We felt that the UN Secretary General would have an impact at the field level if he directed which, specific agency would be in charge of coordination in every country.

You may remember that the UNDP was pushing to have the UNDP Resident Representative be in charge of coordination in every case. This was a case where we very much liked what the UNDP was doing. In fact, for a time, a U.S. national was the head of the UNDP. However, we didn't feel that in every instance the UNDP Resident Representative was the most dynamic leader in a given country.

Q: In general?

COKER: In general. So we urged that the UNDP should recognize that in some countries, among the UN agencies with a representative there, the UNDP Resident Representative should not always be given the leadership role among the UN agencies represented in a given country. In some instances the representatives of other UN agencies should be given the opportunity to play this leadership role. We talked about some, specific cases. We had discovered that, in the case of the FAO [Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN], Salumat, its Director General, had given specific instructions to the FAO representatives that they were not to take any orders or work in cooperation with the Resident Representative of the UNDP, if he was, in fact, the overall coordinator of the UN agencies in that country.

Q: He was not then called the Resident Coordinator, which is the term that they use now.

COKER: Yes.

Q: But at that time he was not.

COKER: He was not. So we had this situation, and I think that we led the charge in persuading many of the OECD countries, who were on these various committees, to accept the fact that coordination should not be tied to a specific, development agency. In fact, we would not even be opposed to having the UN agencies in that given country decide, among themselves, who should be the coordinator. They knew which UN agency in that country had the best leader. If we were going to do it that way, then the coordinator might well be the World Bank representative.

We also recognized the fact that, in most countries, because of the high rate of turnover in UN international personnel serving abroad, there were situations where there was some loss in effectiveness of coordination of other programs.

We sold the other agencies on the idea of establishing a policy of choosing a person who was a national of the host country as an assistant Resident Representative. He or she would have seniority and occupy a certain level position in the UN offices. Previously, the UN had allowed these people to rise to the rank of Senior Program Officer, but not above that. This was something that was bitterly discussed among employees of some of the UN agencies in New York. They said that, with the numbers of personnel that they had, they had to maintain as many positions overseas as possible to have places for rotation. They didn't think, in fact, that the host country person would be able to run the UN operation in that country. That was something that I found I could not accept.

I hate to be personal in this situation, but in Uganda in 1985, when I and all but two of my direct hire staff were evacuated from the country, we left the Ugandan staff in charge of the AID office. We didn't evacuate the Deputy Director of the AID Mission, who was then the Acting Director, and the Executive Officer worked very closely with the Foreign

Service National who was the head of the program side of the Mission. He was serving as Controller, as well as Training Officer. A Foreign Service National was acting as GSO [General Services Officer]. The AID Mission functioned well under this arrangement.

There were some things that they did not have to do. However, six months later, when I went back to Uganda, I found a well organized, still operating Mission. It was very easy for me to come in and immediately take over.

So I pushed for greater recognition of host country nationals working for UN agencies to be given third echelon, eventually leading up to second echelon positions. Right now the UN agencies basically have third echelon positions occupied by host country nationals. However, there are other things which I cannot recall right away.

Q: However, you were able to have some independent views on these issues, rather than simply waiting for instructions from Washington?

COKER: On many occasions I did not wait for instructions from Washington. I felt that I knew enough about AID and I knew enough about our position that I would go ahead and take a stand.

Q: So you didn't have much of a problem in that context.

COKER: No. Returning to my experience with the U.S. Mission to the UN, there were other instances where we would get instructions from the IO [Bureau of International Organization Affairs] side in the Department of State which, I felt, were contrary to USAID policy. I have already given an example of this. In certain cases I knew what our posture was and I was willing to take issue with the instructions we received. I would report these cases. However, because of the amount of paper work flowing into the Bureau of International Organization Affairs in the Department of State, I thought that people there would never read these reports and therefore understand their significance.

On several occasions I had to explain to Ambassador Walters that I was taking certain positions. These were not the positions that probably would be approved by IO. However, when you come down to development matters, these were positions that AID would advocate.

Q: Was he a good supporter?

COKER: He supported me. When I left the U.S. Mission to the UN, I told Gordon MacArthur, my deputy: “You've seen how I operate. That doesn't mean that that's the way you have to operate.” In fact, I just didn't care. I didn't feel that I wanted to be dictated to.

Q: But you found the U.S. Mission to the UN quite supportive of your position?

COKER: Quite supportive. I had an excellent working relationship with Ambassador Walters.

Q: Did you report directly to him?

COKER: Not exactly, but through the Ambassador for Social and Economic Affairs. Under the Ambassador for SE Affairs, we had a Minister-Counselor who was in charge of economic and social affairs. In many instances I found, when we were dealing with certain subjects, the Minister-Counselor would allow me to go ahead and report directly to Ambassador Walters. Then, when it came to meetings between the head of the UNDP, UNICEF, the FAO, and other UN organizations, it would be handled by me and Ambassador Walters. We represented the U.S. at those meetings. We handled requests for meetings with the State Department and tried to arrange for time to testify on Capitol Hill [Congress]. Those requests came directly to Ambassador Walters. He, in turn, would turn them over to me, and then I would get in touch with Washington.

Q: So you didn't have to deal with Congress at all on UN matters.

COKER: No, we didn't. We dealt directly with the Bureau of International Organization Affairs in the State Department, and sometimes with the Bureau of Congressional Relations.

Q: What was your impression of the UN agencies at that time? There wasn't a particularly big push for UN reform, I suppose. However, what was your impression of the different UN agencies?

COKER: When I arrived at USUN in New York, the pressure for UN reform had already started. Rick Niygard was working with me at the time. In the Third Committee, which he was dealing with, there was constant pressure for various levels of reform.

We felt that reforms were probably needed. Wholesale reforms were not necessarily needed, but there were some reforms that should be implemented. The reforms could be identified, and then the timing of enactment of the various reforms. When I arrived in New York, the cost of the attacks on the UN by the Heritage Foundation had become substantial. Some of the UN people felt that other attacks on USUN were generated by Ambassador Jeanne Kirkpatrick [former Permanent Representative of the U.S. to the UN]. Alan Keyes at the time was working out of the U.S. Mission to the UN in New York, under Ambassador Kirkpatrick.

When I arrived in New York, many of the delegates to the UN asked me whether I was “Alan Keyes' person or someone else.” They asked how they should view me. They found that there were individuals working with Ambassador Kirkpatrick and Alan Keyes in the U.S. Mission to the UN who were very much opposed to the UN itself. They were talking about reforms in the UN. The reform process had already started, but it did not receive the level of attention that it subsequently received. Meetings were being held in the Third Committee on a monthly basis with the Secretary General's office about reforms, including the pay structure. The view was that certain aspects of the pay structure were excessive. That is, some of the international civil servants attached to the UN were receiving more

pay than what we, as the bilateral aid donors, were giving to our own people. Therefore, they wanted to bring these pay structures in line with our practices.

When we reviewed these proposals, in many instances we found that the pay that we were receiving as Foreign Service officers was higher than what many of the international civil servants were receiving from the UN. Nevertheless, we were saying that the situation was contrary to that. In any case the process of reforming the UN had started.

Q: What about the development agencies in the UN, such as the UNDP and what the UN's role was in the development process?

COKER: I thought that the UN development agencies, by and large, did not necessarily require a lot of reform. I thought that salaries in those agencies were similar to salaries in the USAID. Unfortunately, since these jobs were staffed by so many individuals from many different nations, I found that there were conflicts. This situation is probably inherent, since different people from different nations had different agendas. I think that this sort of hampered progress in some of the agencies. However, by and large, this problem was not widespread. Every once in a while I would see...

Q: Were you on the Council of the UNDP?

COKER: I was on the Governing Council.

Q: How did you find the UNDP as an operation?

COKER: I found that the UNDP, as an operation, was very much to my liking. The UNDP was following a number of policies and developments similar to what we were doing in USAID. The people on the ground, working at the field level, were on the first line. They had a good grasp of what should be done. In some instances they had problems similar to those we had, in terms of policy implementation. There were some aspects of their work which I didn't particularly care for. Because they were UN employees, many

officials in different countries felt that they could dictate terms to the various Resident Representatives.

In my experience as Mission Director for a bilateral aid donor, we did not bend to pressure or coercion coming from a host country cabinet minister. That was one problem which I found very distasteful. It was very difficult to get many of the UNDP Resident Representatives to take issue with the views of the various host governments, to keep UNDP headquarters in New York fully informed, and try to get New York behind them in such a situation. Instead, what the UNDP Resident Representatives would frequently do was to roll over and basically give in to whatever the host government wanted, because they were afraid that they might be threatened by a request for their recall from the country concerned. I ran into that situation on several occasions and I disliked that.

Q: Did you have a feeling that the UNDP had some niche in the development business that was distinctive or were UNDP representatives trying to do what everybody else did? What was your impression of the UNDP's view of what its role was, compared to bilateral donors, the World Bank, and others?

COKER: I thought that the role which the UNDP had in building capacities was quite unique. That is one particular area where, I felt, the UNDP probably outshone some of the bilateral aid donors. UNDP representatives would go into a ministry of planning, finance, or any particular ministry. They would put a lot of resources, capacity, and institution building into such a ministry. I thought that that was quite good. I thought that the UNDP directed a substantial part of its resources in this direction.

I didn't think that the UNDP made as much of an effort in other sectors, such as the private sector, recognizing that that is where economic growth develops or is generated. I didn't think that the UNDP had much appreciation of this area, as it should have had. Recently, the UNDP has made more of an effort in this area than it did previously, when, I thought, it

should be pushed into doing more. We just had not been getting much of an effort from the UNDP in this area. I found that that was a serious problem.

Also, when it came to policy changes, I supported what I thought was the right way to go in being sanctioned by the World Bank, and some changes advocated by the IMF [International Monetary Fund]. We didn't see much being done in this direction, either, even though UNDP was trying to develop the capacity of national staffs to work more closely with the World Bank, IMF, and others on reform. I didn't get the impression that they were as outspoken about the critical need for these kinds of reform. In fact, they would go through the approach of saying: “Let us build your capacity to understand it better. Then maybe you will have a greater appreciation of it.” There was something good to be said about this approach, too.

Q: Some people claim, and this included the UNDP and others, that the UNDP was unique and had a special relationship with the developing countries, which the aid donor countries did not have. Therefore, it tended to stand apart. Was that your impression?

COKER: I got the impression that that sort of feeling existed. When I look at some of the countries where we did not have AID Missions, and in which the UNDP was able to operate more or less freely, I felt that the UNDP had an outreach that was far superior to ours. To some extent we could utilize the UNDP to carry the message that we wanted to get across. This message could be sent by the UNDP in a much more sensitive and understandable manner and would be accepted by the national governments, rather than a message coming directly from Washington. I sincerely feel that the UNDP was effective in this area.

Q: Well, is there any other aspect of your UN experience which you would care to mention?

COKER: I found working with the delegates from such a variety of countries was extremely rewarding. The UN is a place in which I thoroughly enjoyed working. We were able to

establish very good working relationships with countries with which we did not have very good diplomatic ties. However, we came down to the basic issues, getting people to understand why we would not necessarily support certain things they were asking for and which we might want to change. It gave us an opportunity to make clear that we were sensitive to their needs. We could develop agreement on changes in the language of resolutions in a manner which, we felt, we could vote for. I enjoyed this experience.

Q: Did you find that the representatives of the other countries had the same level of overseas and development experience which, say, you had?

COKER: Unfortunately, not. Many of the representatives of the different countries had not had the field experience which we in USAID had had. However, in a given group you always found two or three people, as in the case of the Canadians, the British, and, occasionally, the Nordic countries, who had had that kind of experience. By and large most countries were sending representatives who did not have much field experience. So those of us who had experience in the field found that the recipient countries, as well as the OECD countries and the UN development agencies, would tend to defer to us on many issues than to these other people who lacked field experience.Assignments following retirement from USAID - September 1988

Q: Would you like to make a few comments about your work since you retired from AID? You have had many assignments. I am not sure how you would like to cover those, but is there anything that stands out from those assignments, apart from the experience in Uganda?

COKER: There were just a few that I would like to mention. I had a chance to serve as the Senior Adviser to the Ministry of Economic Planning in Nigeria, prior to the democratic election in 1993. I served in Nigeria for almost two years, developing the NATCAP, the National Technical Cooperation Assistance Plan. I worked in Nigeria, directly under the authority of the Minister of Economic Planning, Elijah al-Haji, to help to establish their

NATCAP. We were successful in this effort and completed the establishment of the NATCAP.

Q: This was a policy statement?

COKER: It was a policy statement. We got all of the aid donors to agree to the policy statement. We had reached the point where we were ready to go to Phase II of the democratization process. However, at that point in 1993 local and state elections had been held under a truly democratic process. The only thing remaining to be done was the holding of federal election. Since I was finishing up that portion of the policy statement before getting into Phase II, I thought that was a good point at which I could back away from being involved as a Senior Adviser to the government and give them an opportunity to hold the elections. Then, whoever was voted in under the elections, they could take their time in deciding whether they still needed a Senior Adviser.

My last statement to the Nigerian Government, through the Ministry of Economic Planning, was that I would be leaving Nigeria on March 29, 1993, and would not be returning until after the democratically elected government had taken its seat and had several months to get itself in order. Then it could decide to inform the UNDP and decide whether or not it needed a Senior Adviser.

I have not been back to Nigeria since March 29, 1993. For obvious reasons, I have been requested by the UNDP on several occasions to go back and get started on Phase II. I refused to go back to Nigeria until there is a truly, democratically elected government in power.

Q: What was the main thrust of the policy paper?

COKER: The main thrust of the policy paper was that there were five, priority requirements in Nigeria, relating to how development resources should be utilized. We established a

revolving plan. We wanted the government's priorities to be respected by the aid donors. The donors took no exceptions to this.

Q: These were sector priorities.

COKER: Sector priorities, right. The aid donors also recognized, on the face of it, the need to make increased use of host country nationals as experts on the development side. In fact, they were going to adhere to that view. Also, at the same time, we had asked that any technical cooperation coming into the country should be provided in accordance with the priorities established by the Nigerian Government. If the government were offered any assistance, it would be outside of the priority requirements. What we should try to do is to get that restructured or get it changed by their respective governments so that it would be possible to provide assistance in accordance with the needs of Nigeria, and not depending on whether they actually had money for these programs. I felt that the Nigerian Government had been placed in a position where it would be accepting funds in areas which were not designated as priority targets.

I thought that was a good policy approach. At the same time that involved hoping that there would be large amounts of money being spent on international experts. This would provide the Nigerians with an opportunity to have a significant impact on Nigerian development. How it eventually came out, I don't know.

Q: Well, what did you think about the NATCAP concept?

COKER: I thought that the NATCAP concept was good. I think that it was a step in the right direction. I thought that it was extremely good for the African countries which came up with the idea. I was glad to see that other recipient countries from other geographic regions have recognized that this concept was important to their overall coordination of technical cooperation. Thereby, they had a chance to opt in and receive some of the funds to be spent on the management development programs, specifically for NATCAP. Here was an initiative which was started while I was at the UN. One consideration which I didn't

mention before is that the ministers of planning from Sub-Saharan African countries put together this idea of having a management development program. This program, in fact, incorporated such things as NATCAP and enabled them to take advantage of certain in country capacities which would make it possible to establish developmental priorities. At the same time, they can increasingly utilize their own countries' nationals in areas where they are truly expert and trained.

Instead of Africa getting the full $60 million which these African countries had asked for, we finally had to compromise by giving Africa half of that, giving the rest of the world the remaining $30 million. It was a step in the right direction.

Q: Were there any other assignments that you would like to mention?

COKER: Well, outside of the UNDP I had an opportunity to take on assignments to get small scale assistance to micro-enterprises under way. My support for private enterprise development has always been part of my overall outlook.

I had an opportunity to encourage IFAD [International Fund for Agricultural Development] resources to be allocated to countries like Bangladesh and Tanzania and get them to recognize what they needed to do to enhance the growth of small scale enterprises and thereby to achieve economic growth. However, I felt that they should not put all of their eggs in the basket of micro enterprises which, when it came down to creating employment, basically generated job opportunities for individual households. Nevertheless, when it came down to the masses of unemployed people, you have to have businesses large enough to employ the unemployed and reduce the numbers of those who do not have jobs. So this involves changes in some of the definitions of small scale enterprises and what ought to be funded.

At the same time, we should not omit funding that should be going to micro enterprises, recognizing that small and medium size enterprises were going to be the two categories which would generate the greatest economic impact. They could be dispersed throughout

the countries, and you could begin to take people from the central cities, or what are called the “metropoles,” and start to move them to decentralized areas where we could spread the impact on the lives of the people. This would recognize that there are needs for credit, which does not always come through the commercial banks.

However, there were other, non-commercial resources that could be used to provide credit. We had an opportunity to work on this project with the Tanzanian Government and also with the Bangladeshi and the Ghanaian Governments.

When I worked in Ghana, I was involved in designing a concept for getting small scale enterprises started and establishing centers which could work directly with these small entrepreneurs to improve their skills. Quality control units could also be established to determine how to improve the quality of the output of the small entrepreneurs. Thereby, their products could compete with imported products. This would make import substitution possible. To carry this process a step further, we sought to determine how they could compete with the external market and thus export to markets outside their respective nations.

I found that I liked very much all of the work that I started doing in the private sector. I started doing some of this work for UN/OPS, for UNDP, and for IFAD. I liked those opportunities very much. I think that, by and large, I have been able to keep my hand in the development field.

Concluding observations

Q: Let's turn to some of your conclusions. It's kind of difficult with all of the aspects of your rich career, but what do you think were some of the universal lessons which you developed in your own mind and in your efforts over time, about working with development programs?

COKER: I have done several things throughout my career. I found that when I have worked with improving the lives of people, I have found the greatest amount of satisfaction. Long ago, when I was in South Korea, working with different village groups, that was an eye opener to me. I liked working with people and improving their lives. When I worked for AID the first time in 1968 and with the United Planning Organization [UPO], doing something domestically for the lives of people through the anti-poverty program, I found once again that it reinforced what I enjoyed doing when I was in South Korea. That is, working to improve the quality of life for people.

Then, when I came back to AID, I was involved in different sectors where we provided development assistance and technical cooperation. Once again, this reinforced my feeling that one of the most rewarding opportunities that I have had was to determine what we can do to improve the lives of people. I got the greatest amount of satisfaction from doing this.

What we were doing in USAID involved the kind of career that I would want to follow all over again. I felt that we were into various, meaningful sectors. These sectors included education to prepare people so that they could return or remain in their own countries and improve not only their own lives but those of others. It also included agriculture and dealing with small scale enterprises.

Q: Apart from personal satisfaction, what were some of the lessons you derived from practices and approaches that you thought were critical in carrying on any of these programs that were concerned with helping people?

COKER: One critical aspect of this was having the people themselves involved in these programs. All too often we found that if we did not get the people involved in helping to decide where the priorities are and truly convincing them that that was important, our efforts didn't necessarily take hold. Even though we may have a lot of knowledge, there is a need to have the recipients of development assistance involved in the process.

Q: Did you find AID sensitive to this consideration or relatively insensitive to it?

COKER: In general AID is sensitive to this consideration. There have been instances where I have been involved, when it was not sensitive to it. I saw, in hindsight, that we were not practicing what we were preaching. We just didn't put into practice this concept of involving the people in what we were doing. There were situations where we did not get the host country involved in the process. Consequently, we made some mistakes. It was not so much AID's policy that was at fault. That is, we should make a practice of involving those countries in the decision making process and, at the same time, taking advantage of lessons learned to make certain that we don't make mistakes of this kind again. This should really be the motto of the agency.

Q: But the practice?

COKER: This motto is not applied, across the board. There are still AID missions where the leadership gets away from that motto and stays in the mode of basically saying: “We know what's best.” Therefore, they tend to dictate to the people. That's when we find that the programs basically do not achieve the kind of results that we state on paper that we wish to achieve. That is still a problem.

Under this process of re-engineering which AID has under way I would like to see more of a reintroduction of things that we used to do. In this way there would be no misunderstanding of what we are trying to do. We would still have the objective. We would know what we want to achieve. It would be easier to define.

Often, when we try to use the terminology of re-engineering, it is not always easy to determine exactly what you're trying to do. We have good intentions, and if this concept were fully understood, I think that it would be great. I don't think that is necessarily the case now. Still, that does not take away from AID. I find that, by and large, many AID people who have come into the agency since our time have very little knowledge and

grasp of development, in the sense that we knew it. I have met many host country officials who feel that the people coming into AID now are inferior to the people that they were accustomed to working with previously. They have even asked me: “Where does AID find these new people? They don't seem to be as knowledgeable about assessing what the country needs and working with its priorities, as used to be the case with AID staff.” I run into comments of this kind in almost every country that I go to.

When I deal with AID, I find now that people are very demoralized. What brings this on, I don't know. Often, I'd say, this starts with the leadership. However, AID is still an agency that should exist.

Q: Irv, before you get into your final thoughts, let me ask you a couple of more questions.

Do you think that, over the years, U.S. foreign assistance has been effective? Has it made a difference? We hear many people say: “Well, we don't know what you did. It doesn't seem to have changed things. Life is still fairly bad in some of these countries.” So what do you think?

COKER: I would think that this view is wrong. I can't say that in every instance such comments are completely wrong. However, I would say that, from my point of view, when I go into a country and meet a lot of the leaders, I find that many of them have been associated with USAID, from the time they began their education, even at secondary school levels and on up through finishing university study. They speak very forcefully and kindly about having received a start through USAID. Even the owners of AMEX International, a company with which I am presently associated, benefited from receiving their education in the U.S. and are now excellent entrepreneurs. They are doing things, not only here in the U.S., but also overseas.I would say that we could look at much of what a country has done in improving its agriculture. Much of their views of why there is a private sector and their openness in inviting investors was generated by USAID.

Q: Do you think that AID is effective in working with the private sector?

COKER: AID has been effective in working with the private sector. It can continue to be effective. I don't like the direction it is going now in putting far greater emphasis on micro enterprises, to the detriment of small and medium sized enterprises. Micro enterprises do not have the impact in generating the economic growth which, we say, these countries should have. I very much dislike that tendency. However, at the same time we still have emphasis placed on population and health. Some of that is probably much more substantive than having some of those resources going in other directions. More resources need to go into education, and some additional resources need to go into health. We still need to have more resources going into population programs.

However, I think that this effort is disproportionate to what it should be. I think that we have much more going into population control and birth control equipment than we have going into some of the other sectors. AID, by and large, is an effective organization. We are certainly losing the kind of respect and leadership that we initially had. In the past, it was easy for us, at a meeting, to express views which others would support. That is not the case now. People now will openly question our views as to whether or not the course we recommend is the best way to proceed. This is not unhealthy. It makes us question ourselves as to whether or not that is the right thing to do.

At the same time I think that the reduction in significant ways of the levels of resources made available to AID is damaging our ability to deliver. We no longer have the people and we no longer have the financing. I think that these are problems that Congress has to come to grips with. I think that, by and large, the administration recognizes a need for greater resources than many members of Congress do. That could be detrimental to our efforts.

Q: What about the role of the AID Missions overseas? There seems to be some backing away from that.

COKER: There is some backing away from that, but I don't agree with this process of backing away. We as an agency, more so than other, aid donor organizations, have always had a presence in the various countries where we operate which has ensured greater delivery of assistance to the beneficiaries. We have seen many aid donor organizations praising the fact that we have had a presence and that we have been able to achieve a level of development which has moved along at a pace which, more or less, kept up with the time frame which we designed for it from the beginning. Other aid donor agencies have had significant slippage and cost overruns, because they have not had staff in country to monitor their programs.

I think that we are making a mistake in reducing our presence overseas. My problem now is with a situation which has just occurred in Kenya and Tanzania. If this situation is to continue or to expand, our AID Missions will be placed in positions where tourists cannot get to our Embassies, because of political and security problems. They will then apply to AID Missions where we are more concerned with development and improving the lives of the people. This will become a dilemma for us. I think that this is a serious problem.

Q: In the past do you think that foreign assistance made a significant impact on development in the poorer countries?

COKER: I believe that it has made a significant impact on development. I believe that one way to measure this is to make an assessment as to where countries were before they started receiving assistance and then where they have gone subsequently. Even where they have had a great deal of civil strife, when development assistance has resumed, it has helped those countries to jumpstart their efforts to improve their economies. Where these countries have not had civil strife, we have seen significant levels of growth when aid donors, like the U.S. Government, have had a presence. That has meant that investors from the U.S. have not hesitated to invest in those countries. It has also meant that indigenous investors have also not hesitated to make investments. All of this has been a

positive development. So it is a good thing that we have had development assistance. I think and hope that it will continue.

Q: What about your own career in AID over the years? Was this a good experience for you? You were in and out of AID several times.

COKER: I was in and out of AID for my own convenience, as far as personal growth and development are concerned. I would not trade my exposure in AID for anything. I felt that AID was a very substantive provider of assistance to people and to countries. It made a difference in the lives of people. I am proud to have been a part of it. In the past I have referred to how I found that impact to have been positive, in terms of my overall perception of what we ought to be doing. I felt that work in AID provided me with an opportunity to do this. I would still encourage new people to go to work for AID, in spite of some of the reservations I have mentioned.

Q: That was part of my last question. If a young person comes up to you and says: "Should I seek a career in the foreign assistance field in AID?" What would you recommend?

COKER: I would still recommend AID as a career field. At the same time I would express some caveats. I quickly say to such people that it is not the same agency that I once worked for. Rather substantive changes have taken place in it. I think that this has probably reduced the level of respect that development specialists used to have when I worked in AID. However, at the same time much of the work goes on. I would like to see a return to some of the kinds of development assistance roles that we used to play in the past, when we had a large number of direct hire employees who felt truly committed to development. Therefore, they put a tremendous amount of their heart into working for AID. So I still encourage people to go to work for AID, regardless of what you may read about the deficiencies in the agency. You are not going to find another donor of developmental assistance that has the kind of impact which AID has had, on an overall basis, when you

measure the assistance which has been provided and which has been received. So, yes, I constantly beat the drums for USAID.

Q: Well, maybe we should end this interview at this point. It's been an excellent interview. Thank you very much.Annex

MEMORANDUM

TO:AA/AFR, Mr. F. S. Ruddy FROM:AAA/AFR/DP, Irvin D. Coker SUBJECT:AID Checklist for Missions to Focus Upon the Policy Issues Raised by the Berg Report Reference: Your request dated 26 January 82

The following would constitute a checklist of Sub-Saharan African government policies and administrative practices whose monitoring and evaluation could focus attention upon the policy recommendations of the Berg Report and the need to implement those recommendations. They are:

0)Host country's trade and exchange rate policies - anti-export-biased? Conducive or not conducive to achieving needed structural adjustments to external changes and/or shocks?

0)Host country's pricing policy especially with regard to the agricultural sector, and attempts of host country government to supplant market mechanism - ineffective? Effective but counterproductive?

3)Lack of efficiency in marketing of agricultural inputs and outputs due to uneconomic substitution of public sector activity (parastatals) for private enterprise.

0)Failure of public sector institutions to perform functions for which they are uniquely suited - e.g. carry out or support agricultural research, pest control programs, etc.

5)Preference for large cumbersome public bodies over smaller, more cost effective, organizations in the public sector, cooperative sector, and private sector.

6)Host country government's hostility to private sector activity - how compatible is this with desire for cost-effective transfer of technology and know-how through foreign direct investment?

0)Host country government's attitude toward economic analysis oprojects, and toward analysis of its economic policies.

8)Recurrent costs and managerial skills implications of host countrgovernment's investment program.

0)Need for better donor coordination.

End of interview